

MORTAL DANGER

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Feiweil and Friends
New York

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK
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*For the survivors:
That which did not kill us made us stronger.*

DEATH WATCH

I was supposed to die at 5:57 a.m.

At least, I had been planning it for months. First I read up on the best ways to do it, then I learned the warning signs and made sure not to reveal any of them. People who wanted to be saved gave away their possessions and said their good-byes. I'd passed so far beyond that point; I just wanted it all to stop.

There was no light at the end of this tunnel.

So two days after the school year ended, I left my house for what I intended to be the last time. I wrote no note of explanation. In my opinion, it never offered closure and it only made the survivors feel guilty. Better to let my parents think I suffered from some undiagnosed mental illness than to have them carry the knowledge that maybe they could've saved me; that burden could drive my parents to the ledge behind me, and I didn't want that. I only wanted an ending.

Earlier I had walked toward the BU T station I used for other errands, like shopping and school. There was plenty of time for me to

change my mind, but I'd done all the research, and it was meticulous. I'd considered all sorts of methods, but in the end, I preferred water because it would be tidy and quick. I hated the idea of leaving a mess at home for my parents to clean up. This early—or late, depending on your perspective—the city was relatively quiet. *Just as well.* I'd gotten off at North Station and trudged the last mile or so.

Jumpers loved this place, but if you picked the wrong time, somebody would notice, call the authorities, and then you'd have cars honking, lanes shutting down, police cars . . . pretty much the whole media circus. I was smart enough to choose my opportunity carefully; in fact, I'd studied the success stories and compared the times when the most deaths occurred. Constrained by public transport hours, I arrived a bit later than the majority of those who died here, but my leap would still be feasible.

At this hour, there wasn't as much traffic. The bridge was a monster, but I didn't have to go all the way to the other side. Predawn murk threw shadows over the metal pylons as I faced my fate. I felt nothing in particular. No joy, but no sadness either.

The last three years had been the worst. I'd seen the well-meant *It Gets Better* videos, but I wasn't tough enough to make it through another year, when there was no assurance college would be better. The constant jokes, endless harrassment—if this was all I could look forward to, then I was ready to check out. I didn't know why people at school hated me so much. To my knowledge, I'd never done anything except exist, but that was enough. At Blackbriar Academy—an expensive, private school that my parents thought guaranteed a bright future—it wasn't okay to be ugly, weird, or different. I was all of the above. And not in the movie way, either, where the geek girl

took down her hair and swapped her horn rims for contacts, then suddenly, she was a hottie.

When I was little, it didn't bother me. But the older I got, the meaner the kids became, particularly the beautiful ones. To get in with their crowd, you needed a certain look, and money didn't hurt. Teachers fell in with whatever the Teflon crew told them, and most adults had enough secret cruelty to believe somebody like me had it coming—that if I tried harder, I could stop stuttering, get a nose job, dye my hair, and join a gym. So clearly it was my fault that I'd rather read than try to bring myself up to the standards of people I hated.

Over the years, the pranks got worse and worse. They stole my clothes from my gym locker, so I had to go to class all stinky in my PE uniform. Not a day went by that they didn't do something, even as simple as a kick or a shove or a word that dug deep as a knife. I used to tell myself I could survive it—I quoted Nietzsche in my head and I pretended I was a fearless heroine. But I was as strong as my tormentors could make me, and it wasn't enough. Four months ago, the last day before winter break, they broke me.

I pushed the memory down like the bile I swallowed on a daily basis. The shame was the worst, as if I'd done something to deserve this. Being smart and ugly wasn't reason enough for what they did to me. Nothing was. At that point, I implemented plan B. I had no friends. Nobody would miss me. At best, my parents—oblivious academic types—would see me as a ruined potential. Sometimes I thought they had me as a sociology experiment. Afterward, they'd retrieve my body and mark my file with a big red FAIL stamp.

The sky was gray and pearly, mist hanging over the river. Drawing in a deep breath, I gathered my courage. To my amusement, I'd

passed a sign that read, DEPRESSED? CALL US. Then it listed a number. I'd ignored that, along with a massive heap of pigeon shit, and continued across until I was far enough out that the water would drown me fast, provided the fall didn't kill me on impact. Now I only had to climb over quietly and let go.

The end.

A jagged shard tore loose in my chest; tears burned in my eyes. *Why didn't anyone notice? Why didn't anyone do anything?* So, maybe I was like the other lost souls, after all. I wanted a hand on my shoulder, somebody to stop me. Shaking, I put my foot on the guardrail and swung my leg over. On the other side, metal at my back, the dark river spread before me as if it led to the underworld. For me, it did. My muscles coiled, but I didn't need to jump. All I had to do was lean into space. There would be a few seconds of freefall, and then I'd hit the water. If the drop didn't kill me, the stones in my pockets would.

I'd planned for all contingencies.

I stepped forward.

A hand on my shoulder stopped me. The touch radiated heat, shocking me nearly to death. I couldn't remember the last time anyone had touched me, except to hurt. My parents weren't huggers. So long as I got straight As, they had little to do with me. They said they were rearing me to be self-sufficient. It felt more like they were raising me to self-destruct.

Mission accomplished.

I turned, expecting a corporate drone jonesing to start his cubicle time early, and on target to screw up my careful plans. In that case, I'd have to talk fast to avoid police involvement and incarceration in a mental facility. They'd put me on death watch and stare at me for three days in case I relapsed with the urge to kill myself. The lie

hovered on the tip of my tongue—how I was researching suicide to make a sociology essay more compelling—but the guy who'd interrupted my exit also stole the ability to form coherent thought. His hand remained on my shoulder, steadying me, but he didn't speak.

I didn't either.

I couldn't.

He had the kind of face you saw in magazines, sculpted and air-brushed to perfection. Sharp cheekbones eased into a strong jaw and a kissable mouth. His chin was just firm enough. He had a long, aquiline nose and jade eyes with a feline slant. His face was . . . haunting, unsettling, even. His layered mop of dark hair gained coppery streaks in the halo of passing headlights that limned us both. In a minute or two, somebody would see us. Though traffic was light, it wasn't nonexistent, and eventually some concerned motorist would pull over or make a call. I saw my window of opportunity narrowing.

"What?" I managed to get the word out without stammering.

"You don't have to do this. There are other options."

I didn't try to bullshit. His direct, gold-sparked gaze made me feel that would be a waste of time. Part of me thought I might have already jumped, and he was my afterlife. Or maybe I was on a ventilator after they fished me out of the river, which made this a coma dream. I'd read studies where doctors posited that people experienced incredibly vivid dreamscapes during catatonia.

"Yeah? Like what?"

I figured he'd mention therapy. Group sessions. Medication. Anything to get my butt off this bridge. Right then, only the strength of his biceps kept me from flinging myself backward. Well, that . . . and curiosity.

"You can let me help you."

"I don't see how that's possible." My tone sounded bleak, and it gave away more than I wanted.

I didn't mean to tell a random stranger my problems, no matter how pretty he was. In fact, that appeal made me trust him less. Beautiful people treated me well only when they were setting me up for something worse. In hindsight, I should've been wary that day, but I was just so tired, and I wanted so bad to believe they intended to stop tormenting me. I was ready to accept the apology and move on. *Everybody grows up, right?*

"Here's the deal. We'll get something to drink, and I'll make my proposal. If you don't like what you hear, I'll escort you back here and this time, I won't stop you. I'll even stand guard so nobody else does."

"Why should I? You could be a murdering weirdo."

"You intended to kill yourself anyway."

"I was going to be quick. You might not be. Being suicidal doesn't mean I'm stupid."

He laughed. "See, this is why I didn't bring my car. I *knew* you wouldn't get in."

Weird. That sounded like we were old friends, but I'd remember someone like him. "You got that right."

"You can walk five feet behind me if it makes you feel better."

I wasn't sure it did, but with his help, I climbed back over the guardrail. His argument made sense, and I was curious. What did I have to lose? He might try to recruit me into a cult. Nervous and wary, I trudged behind him, my eyes on his back at all times. I was ready to end things on my terms, not wind up living in a hole in somebody's basement. That would definitely be worse. I shivered,

wondering if this was the best idea. Yet curiosity refused to let me back out.

He led the way off the bridge, quite a long walk the second time around; the rocks in my pockets gained weight with each step. Eventually, we reached the street, passing a number of closed restaurants, Italian places mostly. He stopped at a twenty-four-hour diner called Cuppa Joe. The place had a giant mug out front, outlined in red neon. Inside, the vinyl booths were cracked and sealed over with silver duct tape. On the wall, a neon blue-and-pink clock buzzed, a low drone just inside my range of hearing. According to the position of the hands, it was 6:05 a.m., and I'd missed my deadline.

A couple of waitresses wore the ultimate in polyester chic, while old women sat nursing coffee with lipstick imprints on chipped cups, makeup caked into their wrinkles. There were elderly couples as well; men in plaid trousers and white belts, ladies in shirtwaists. Everyone in the diner had an odd look, like they were players on a set, and some other-worldly director was saying, *Now this is what a diner looked like in 1955*. I also counted too many customers for this hour. Finally, there was an expectant air, as if they had all been awaiting our arrival. I dismissed the thought as symptomatic of how surreal the day had become.

The hot samaritan sat down next to the window, so that the red light from the giant coffee cup on the roof fell across the table in waves. I took a seat opposite him and folded my hands like I was at a college admissions interview. He smiled at me. Under fluorescent lights, he was even better looking than he'd appeared on the bridge.

It didn't make me happy.

"So is this where you call the cops? You lured me in quietly. Good

job." To my astonishment, I got the words out without a hitch. In his company, I wasn't nervous at all, mostly because I half suspected he was a figment of my imagination.

"No, this is where I introduce myself. I'm Kian."

Okay, not what I expected. "Edie."

Short for Edith, who had been my maternal great-aunt. No one used my nickname, except me—in my head. At school, they called me Eat-it.

"I know who you are."

My breath caught. "What?"

"I didn't find you by accident." Before I could answer, Kian signaled the waitress and ordered coffee.

She glanced at me with an inquiring expression. *What the hell*. If I was dying after this conversation anyway—

"I'll have a strawberry milk shake."

"Hey, Hal," the waitress called. "Shake one in the hay."

An assenting noise came from the back and then the woman went behind the counter to pour Kian's coffee. She served it with a flourish, along with a sugar bowl and a pitcher of cream. "That's how you take it, right?"

He smiled up at her. "Good memory, Shirl."

"That's why I get the big bucks." She winked and sauntered to her next table.

I picked up the thread as he stirred cream and sugar into his drink. "Explain how you know who I am and where to find me. It sounds stalker-y, and I'm inclined to bail as soon as I finish my shake."

"Then I have time to make my case," he said softly. "Misery leaves a mark on the world, Edie. All strong emotions do. Rage, terror, love, longing . . . they're powerful forces."

"Right. What does that have to do with me?"

"Your pain came to my attention months ago. I'm sorry it took me so long to act, but I'm constrained by certain rules. I had to wait until you reached the breaking point before I could offer you a deal."

"If this is where you offer a fiddle of gold against my soul, I'm out."

His smile flashed. A little shiver of warmth went through me because he seemed to appreciate my wit. "Nothing so permanent."

"I'm all ears," I said as the waitress delivered my shake, hand-dipped with whorls of fresh whipped cream and a bright red cherry on top—almost too pretty to drink. Deliberately, I stirred it with my straw, ruining the beauty, and sucked up a huge mouthful.

Delicious.

"When humans of exceptional potential reach the breaking point—what we call extremis—we can step in."

I choked on my drink. "Humans. Which makes you *what*, exactly?"

Now I felt sure this was the lead-in to the most spectacular punk ever. I craned my neck, looking for Cameron, Brittany, Jen, Allison, or the cheer mascot, Davina. She had too much melanin for Black-briar squad standards, so they kept her in a lion costume half the school year, and when she got out of it, she ran errands for the Teflon crew, who treated her more like a minion than a friend. I didn't see anyone from school, but that didn't mean they weren't in somebody's bedroom, laughing their asses off through this guy's button cam. This would probably end up on YouTube.

Like the first video.

Kian shook his head. "I can't answer that unless we come to an agreement."

"Let's cut to the chase," I said tiredly. "I don't know what they're paying you, if you're a struggling actor, or what, but I'm not interested. This isn't even the meanest prank they've pulled. Are they watching right now?"

"Edie—"

"Wait," I cut in. "I bet you don't get paid unless I play along. Fine. Tell me more about this awesome deal. Can I get it for four low payments of nine ninety-five?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he leaned across the table and took my hand. *Now that's commitment to the bit*, I thought.

Then the world vanished, a static skip in an old VCR tape. I remembered those from elementary school, the low-rent one I attended before my parents published, filed their first patent, and could afford a pricey prep school. That fast, the diner was just *gone*.

Brutal wind whipped my hair against my face. My glasses frosted over and my skin tightened with goose bumps in the icy air. A mountain stared back at me, rocky and wild. If I took four steps forward, I'd pitch off the edge. Vertigo spun my head, and I clung to Kian's hand, unable to say a word. This looked like Tibet—or the pictures I'd seen anyway. Deep down, I'd always wanted to go . . . to kneel in a holy place with the silent monks. Could he *know* this about me? I glimpsed no civilization, just trees, rocks, and stars. The cold gnawed through me; I was dressed for late spring in Boston, not in Sherpa gear. Shock paralyzed me for a few seconds.

God, I had to be out of my damn mind. *Hey, coma dream, how you doing? Let's see where this takes you.* But on the off chance it was real, I whispered, "Stop. Make it stop."

Another shift, and we were back at Cuppa Joe. My hands felt like chips of ice. His, still wrapped around mine, radiated the same heat

I'd noticed when he touched my shoulder. I glanced around wildly, wondering if anyone had noticed. The other patrons showed no signs that anything was wrong, but people didn't *do* that. Vanish and materialize, like somebody was beaming us in a transporter.

But maybe that was key. *People* didn't. Kian had called me an exceptional human, implying he wasn't. I'd been full of breezy skepticism before; it died on that mountaintop. I drew my hand away, took a couple of deep breaths, trying to calm my pounding heart.

"How come nobody even blinked? That was some straight-up *Star Trek* stuff."

"This is our place," he said. "Company owned. I can't tell you more right now."

"Well, that jaunt registers pretty high on the she'll-take-me-seriously meter."

"I don't usually have to resort to it this early in the conversation," he admitted.

My milk shake was still sitting on the table, melting into baby-pink goop. "Sorry I cut you off. You said something about extremis?"

He nodded. "That's when a human is about to die."

Oddly, that cheered me. "So I was going to succeed."

Kian didn't seem so pleased. "Yes. In a sense, you're already gone, Edie. If your fate wasn't currently in limbo, I wouldn't be permitted to talk to you. There's a pivotal moment just before death, when bargains can be made. I'm authorized to offer you three favors now in return for three favors later."

"I don't understand. What kind of . . . favors?"

"Anything you want," he said.

"*Anything?*" By my tone, it had to be obvious I meant things bigger and more impossible than tickets to Tahiti.

"My ability to change your life is limited only by your imagination."

"But then you can ask me for anything," I pointed out. "Three times. What if it's not something I can deliver?"

"The favors requested in return will always be within your power to grant. That's the way it works."

"But there are no parameters of what you might ask . . . or when. It might be terrible. Or illegal." Too well, I remembered "The Monkey's Paw," the burden of being a reader. Somebody who spent less time lost in books might've already signed on the dotted line.

"You were ready to throw your life away," Kian said. "But are you brave enough to change it?"

"You never answered me. What *are* you?"

"How would that help you decide? If I'm a demon, I'm unlikely to admit it, so I could say anything. How would you know if I'm telling the truth?"

He had me there. I scowled and sipped my shake, the possible dangers and consequences banging around my head. Since I'd accepted I didn't have a future, it seemed less scary to consider everything that could go wrong down the line. If my life imploded twenty years later when the bill came due, wouldn't it be worth it to be happy first? It had been so long since I laughed that I couldn't remember what it felt like to walk around without this awful weight in my chest.

"In a theoretical sense, say I agree to your deal. Is there a time limit on when I have to use my favors?"

Appreciation sparked in his gaze. Kian inclined his head. "The first must be used within a year. The rest within five."

"To prevent people from getting what they want with the first,

then sitting on the others until they die, thus blocking you from asking anything in return."

"Exactly. The return favors may be collected anytime after completion of our side of the bargain."

"So repayment could be due anytime. Talk about living under the hammer."

"Some people feel the way. Others live in the moment and don't worry about what might come."

I jammed the straw deep into my glass, chewing my bottom lip. "This sounds pretty diabolical. I hope you know that."

"I'm aware." Sorrow threaded his tone, making me wonder what could make someone like *him* sad.

"Can you tell me anything about the people you work for?"

"At the moment, no."

I'd like to glean some more information before making a decision, but his response implied he could only answer questions after I agreed to the terms. That seemed shady; it couldn't be good if my benefactors preferred to hide in the shadows. One thing could be said of this situation; curiosity had supplanted despair as my dominant emotion.

"You said you come to exceptional humans. Why me?" I was brainy, but not the kind of smart that cured cancer.

"If I told you *why* we want to save you, it could screw up your timeline."

"You mean if I learn that I solve cold fusion, then I might not. I might decide to breed rabbits instead."

"You hate rabbits," Kian said gently.

"Yeah." I did—since one bit me in the fourth grade—but how weird that he knew.

"The deal is on the table. Choose, Edie."

From here, I sensed it was up to me. "Can I have some time to think about it?"

"No. I'm sorry."

"It comes down to a leap then, either way. You can put me back on the bridge . . . only this time you don't stop me. Will it be like we never came here or went to the mountain?"

"Yes."

I smiled. For someone like me, there could be only one reply.

THE HOUSE ALWAYS WINS

"I'm in. Obviously my life sucks. If it didn't, we wouldn't be here."

Kian smiled, a soft breath of relief escaping him, like he truly cared, and he was glad he didn't have to dump me back on the bridge. More likely, he worked on commission. Life had made me cynical, always waiting for the other shoe to drop.

He reached into his pocket and drew out a shining silver coin. At first glance, it could've been a quarter; it was around the same size. But there was a symbol I couldn't identify engraved on one side; more similar to a kanji than any Western language I'd seen, yet I didn't think it was Japanese. Kian flipped it over, revealing an infinity sign on the back.

"Let me have your wrist."

"Why?"

"Accepting the mark formalizes the agreement."

"Will it hurt?"

"Yes. But it's quick."

I appreciated his honesty. A deep breath escaped me as I pushed my right hand toward him. His fingers were warm and sure, exposing my palm, then he slid back my sleeve. As promised, it burned like fire when the metal touched my flesh. A glimmer of light shimmered—almost like a photocopier—and an intense prickle-pain worked beneath my skin. He pressed the coin even tighter to my flesh, until I almost couldn't bear it. I bit my lower lip, blinking hard against rising tears. Just when I thought I'd scream, the sensation eased off.

"Done?" he asked, watching my face.

"You're asking me?"

"When it stops hurting, I can pull the token away."

"It just feels like metal now."

With a relieved look, he removed it and I studied the mark on my arm. My parents would freak if they saw it since it resembled a tattoo. Oddly, there was no residual pain, and the skin didn't look red or irritated, as I'd seen on people who came to school with new ink.

"There's no special care required," Kian told me. "But I'm afraid we're not finished. I need your other arm."

"The other symbol?" I guessed.

He nodded. "The infinity sign signifies your agreement to the deal. You need the other mark to identify your affiliation."

"I have no idea what that means."

"It tells certain parties that you're an asset, or part of the opposition."

"So showing it could help or hurt me, depending on who sees it?"
This crap was getting more complicated by the second.

"Yes."

"Am I allowed to cover these up with armbands or bracelets?"

"Sure. You just can't change them with normal ink or remove them via laser."

"Can't or aren't allowed to?" There was a fairly substantial difference.

"It's not physically possible with existing technology."

"That's the least of my worries anyway." Sighing faintly, I braced and gave him my left arm, wishing I knew what that kanji meant.

This time, I was better prepared for the searing pain. The tears spilled and overflowed despite my best efforts, but I didn't utter a sound while he marked me. At last the coin reverted to cool metal instead of molten lava and I nodded at Kian. He pulled the token away and dropped it into his pocket.

"We're almost done. Can I see your cell phone?"

"Yeah."

It was jammed in my right front pocket. My parents insisted I keep it with me, because we communicated mainly via text. I suspected they'd use my cell like a LoJack to track me if I went missing. *You almost did.* I imagined myself floating in the dark water like Ophelia, only I wouldn't leave a pale and lovely corpse with flowers tangled in my hair.

"Sure." I dug it out and passed it across the table. Upside down, I watched him enter his name and program his number.

"When you're ready to request your first favor, call me."

"Really?" My brows went up.

"You expected more flash?"

"Well, after the mountain trick . . ."

"I could pop in at random to ask, *are you ready yet?* but I thought you'd find that startling. And creepy."

Caught off guard, I laughed quietly. "You have a point."

"And *you* have a nice smile."

I winced. "Don't. You already got me to agree to the deal."

"I won't apologize," Kian said, "but I'll stop if it makes you uncomfortable."

"It just makes me think you're full of shit."

Taking my words as a sign to wrap things up, he waved at the waitress to get the check, and once he had it, dropped a few bills to cover it. "Let's go then. I'll see you home."

I hurried toward the doors, hating that moment of vulnerability when the rest of the world could stare at me. By force of habit, my shoulders came forward and my head went down. Hair the color of field mice tumbled forward to hide my face. I felt better once I pushed out into the early morning light. Kian caught the door as it swung back, and then he was beside me, another flash of heat and color in a morning warming up in shades of salmon and vermillion, colors I never wore, but whose drama suited him.

"Are you gonna . . ." I trailed off and waggled my fingers.

He arched an amused brow. "I'm sorry, what?"

I tried snapping my fingers. "You know. Presto! We're at my place."

"Is that your first favor?" Kian tilted his head, and I noticed how tall he was—six feet plus, with a lean build. His muscles were clean and compact, something I rarely noticed about boys before. Admiring guys I'd never date felt too much like a beggar pressing his face against a bakery window in hopeless longing for the delicious things he'd never have. Kian was that kind of forbidden beauty, not for me. *Never* for me.

I covered that feeling as best I could. "No way. Are people seriously that dumb?"

"Not the ones *I* save," he said softly.

It was stupid how good that made me feel. Warm. Being smart had never mattered like it should; it never made me happy. It only let me notice how I didn't fit in. I could spend hours on equations, but I didn't know what to say to people my own age. Not that the snobs at school had ever given me a chance. I shouldn't care what any of them thought, but a dark, seething part of me craved payback. I imagined myself, cool and beautiful, sweeping through the halls while the guys who had called me names stared, knowing they'd never get me. Kian could make this happen.

I was startled to notice we'd reached North Station. "What if I'm ready now?"

"You know what you want?" Surprised tone. Kian led the way to the T. Evidently he planned to escort me to my door.

This has been an incredibly weird morning.

Some people might think this was a superficial request, but they wouldn't understand *why* I wanted it. Not just so I'd know—for once—what it was like to be one of the beautiful people. No, once I got inside the golden circle, I'd dismantle it brick by brick. A sharp, angry smile cut free, and I didn't care what Kian thought. From this point forward, I had a goal—and *planning* was my forte.

I nodded. "By the time we get to my place, I'll have the verbiage ironed out."

"Let me guess, you're worried about the favor twisting back on you." A faint sigh escaped him, rich with weary impatience.

"You get this a lot, I guess?"

"Often enough."

It was a little odd to be *ordinary*. Predictable. At school, I was the weirdo. Nobody talked to me for fear of coming down with a case of social leprosy. For the last two years, I had been eating in the

bathroom, which was disgusting and unsanitary, but it beat the cafeteria, surrounded by empty seats, while the buttholes from the lacrosse team threw pickles at the back of my head.

"I don't need to worry about that?"

He shrugged. "You can. But I'll point out that if I don't make you happy, if I make your life worse, than you'll end up on the bridge again, and we won't get our favors repaid."

That sounded logical, but nothing could've prepared me for how *strange* this day had been. "Isn't there a codicil preventing a human from killing himself when he owes favors?"

"You still have free will," Kian said. "Even under the company's aegis."

Which meant, presumably, it happened. My shoulders tightened with confusion and uncertainty. *Too late for buyer's remorse.* While I wanted to believe that Kian knew what he was doing and he was being straight with me, I didn't have a trusting nature, especially with the beautiful people. Still, I was alive so far, which was more than I'd expected from the day.

We boarded the train in silence, and for several stops, I constructed my request. Eventually as we approached Saint Mary's Street, I decided simplicity would serve best. I took a deep breath and followed him off the train. The neighborhood wasn't quiet, even at this hour. A few undergrads laughed as they stumbled home from a night of partying. I lived in the no-man's-land just beyond the bounds of Fenway. If I squinted, I could glimpse how the other half lived, a block away in Brookline proper. This area was a weird mix of broke college students and rich medical professionals, but you could usually tell who lived in which buildings by how well they had been renovated.

The brownstone where I lived wasn't pristine, though residents tried to brighten things up by decorating their window boxes.

Belatedly I realized that Kian was waiting to hear my first request. "I want to be beautiful without losing any aptitude I have. No time limits, no melting face, *no* surprises."

His teeth flashed white as he grinned. "That's easy enough."

"For you, maybe." A thought struck me, and I stared up at him, wide-eyed. "Or did you wish for the same thing, however long ago?"

"Do *you* think I did?"

His features were strong but too symmetrical to come from natural design. Everything aligned just so, lending an exotic cast to his perfection. I hadn't been able to put my finger on what bothered me about him until just now.

"Totally. I'd bet my life on it."

"You'll throw that away at the least provocation, won't you?"

"That's not an answer. Admit it, you weren't born looking like that."

No wonder he had been so nice to me. Beneath the swan feathers, he hid an ugly duckling skin. It made me like him a little more. If he'd been in my shoes, maybe he lacked the natural meanness that I'd experienced at school.

"You're right," he said softly.

"Which means you were in my position once. Doesn't it?"

He sucked in a surprised breath. "People don't usually deduce that so fast."

I imagined him, poised on the verge of ending his life, and a chill swept over me. I wanted to touch him—and that wasn't like me at all. Still, my fingers flexed with the urge. Questions boiled in my brain,

but we didn't know each other well enough for me to ask what had been so bad about his life that he'd wanted out. Seeing him now gave me hope. One day I could put this misery behind me, right? Eventually I'd look back on this moment and be grateful Kian stopped me from making my final mistake.

It also answered the question about his origins. He might not be human anymore, but he had been, once. It hinted of scary things lurking in my future, yet if I scheduled my favors right, I could enjoy life before I started serving Mephistopheles—or whoever Kian worked for. If I wasn't numb with shock, I'd be more worried.

"In turn, that means you survived your three favors and the repayment."

"There's a limit to what I'm allowed to tell you, Edie."

"It's like a secret society," I guessed. "And I'm only permitted what's available to initiates of my level."

"You're too damn clever for your own good. Are you sure this is what you want?"

"Positive." The moment I said it, my wrist burned like fire, and I whipped it up, narrowly restraining a cry. A dark line appeared across the top of the infinity sign, creepy as hell, like ink working its way out of my skin from the inside. I gasped as the burn subsided, touching my wrist as if I might smear the mark, but it was cool and dry.

"Sorry, I should've warned you. That's a tally. When you have three lines—"

"It means you've used all your favors. Got it. Can I see your wrists?"

He offered them without complaint, and I saw now that he had a kanji similar to mine on his left arm, and an infinity sign struck through with three lines on his right. I frowned.

"Why is one of yours a little different from mine?"

"Spoilers, Sweetie"

I was delighted to catch him quoting *Doctor Who*. Smiling, I went into the brownstone and traipsed up the stairs to our apartment. "You can't be serious," I said over one shoulder.

"About what?"

"Not being able to answer. You said you couldn't until I signed on the dotted line. Well, I have. So start talking."

"I was kidding, actually. Ownership symbols are tweaked according to a variety of factors, including the faction represented. This line here," he pointed, "represents Raoul."

"Who's that?"

"The guy who offered me a deal."

For a few seconds, I studied my own wrist, then his. "What part of the mark are you?"

"I'm the curved line crossing these two others." He traced the arc on his left wrist with one fingertip.

"Ah." As that was the only difference, the rest of the character had to relate to the faction Kian represented. *I'm totally getting a handle on this*. Fighting a blush, I asked, "Do you want to come in?"

It was safe to invite him. The day before, my parents had gone to a symposium, something to do with string theory. That was another reason I'd chosen this as the day. My parents wouldn't be home until later, no chance they would've missed me before it was too late.

He nodded. "We have some planning to do."

Music to my ears. Inside, the apartment was small, cluttered with books. There was no television; I had been lucky to persuade my parents I needed a laptop for homework and research. I also watched shows on the Internet—not that they knew. I suspected my parents

believed I was too serious and focused to pursue mindless entertainment, but sometimes I really needed to hide out in somebody else's world when mine became unbearable.

The old brown tweed sofa sagged in the middle. Kian didn't seem to notice when he sank down on one end. I sat on the other, hoping I didn't look as nervous as I felt.

"You'll have to go away for the summer," he said.

Talk about lobbing a brick. "*What?*"

"Think about it. Your parents will question the changes if they happen overnight. We need to build a credible framework."

"So I'm going to makeover camp? Or a Swiss finishing school? Somehow I don't think my parents will go for it."

Kian shook his head. "That's why we craft the story to fit the audience. I bet they'd love it if you were accepted to the Summer Science Program, where you sharpen your academics and get college credit at the same time."

"Yeah," I said in surprise. "They would."

"The actual changes? I can knock them out in a couple of hours. But you have to be gone or your parents will question how it's possible."

"And on campus, I'll have a chance to practice being . . . the new me."

"Exactly. It's a no-risk setting for a test run. By the time you go back to Blackbriar, you'll be self-assured, ready to teach them a lesson."

I'd read all the psychology books. In theory, I knew that confidence worked wonders when it came to dealing with other people. That didn't mean I could achieve it on my own; I had spent years doubting my worth on every level except my brain.

But Kian could give me a boost . . .

I put that aside, troubled over his insights. "You knew about the rabbits . . . you know I go to Blackbriar. How much do you know about me, exactly?"

He didn't answer, only offered a level look, which was the only reply I needed. I told myself it was part of his job, and I shouldn't freak out. There were probably a hundred other ugly girls in his phone, assigned by some creepy bureau of supernatural resources.

So I asked something else. "You really think I can pull this off?"

"The assholes at Blackbriar won't know what hit them." For a moment, a cruel light burned in his jade eyes, more catlike in the morning light.

"That sounds almost . . . personal. Do you have a score to settle there, too?"

"No," he said quickly. "Of course not. I just want to see them get what's coming, after what they did to you."

Naturally, he'd sympathize with me. If he had been a freak, geek, or misfit before his favors kicked in, he had scars where it didn't show. The bullies *did* deserve this. No question. I'd hadn't done anything to them.

Yet.

I never told him what I planned to do, though. "How do you know I don't just want to be beautiful?"

His chin dropped, eyes sliding away from mine. "I saw the expression in your eyes when you asked. I've seen it before. And there's nothing simple about it."

He was right about that. The Teflon crew had created in me a powerful cocktail of hate, anger, shame, and a burning desire for justice. Maybe somebody like me couldn't get it at Blackbriar, but the new Edie could.

I tapped the arm of the couch, frowning. "Back to the SSP. They require applications for a program like that, usually with references. I don't see how I can get in. It's already—"

"You saw what I could do earlier." Kian chuckled. "You've accepted that I can change how you look. Now you're questioning if I can get your name on a list?"

Heat pinked my cheeks, and I ducked my head. My glasses slipped down my nose. "When you put it that way . . . wait, this doesn't count as my second favor, does it?"

"No. You're not asking to get into the SSP, so it's an adjunct service as the most expeditious way to grant your request with minimal disruption to your life."

"And that's important to your bosses, I guess?"

He nodded. "If parents become suspicious, it complicates the situation. They prefer not to make deals with minors, but extremism happens when it happens."

My head spun with the wild revelations that just kept piling up. By this point, numbness took over. I'd process this stuff later.

Kian went on, "I'll take care of the registration and travel arrangements. It's up to you to convince your parents." He had his cell phone in his hand and tapped away, checking something. "The session I have in mind starts in three days."

So soon. I didn't know if I was ready, but excitement thrummed through me, supplanting the shock. It was three parts terror and one part anticipation, all better than the dread and dejection that had dogged my steps since winter break.

"I'll handle them," I promised. "Text me the flight time?"

Gold flecks sparked in his green eyes when he smiled at me.

Reluctantly I shared his amusement because it was infectious. A laughing Kian was . . . beyond lovely. But he didn't explain what was so funny.

I sighed. "What'd I say now?"

"It's cute that you think I'm booking you on a plane."

Belatedly I remembered the insta-trip to the mountaintop. "Because this is favor-related, you can port me?"

"You're *such* a smart girl," he mocked gently.

"Whatever."

"I'll be back for you in two days, Edie. Pack light. You'll need a new wardrobe before we're done anyway."

"And that's part of the deal?" I asked, fascinated.

"Sure. Clothes impact the perception of beauty."

"Sweet." I'd always hated shopping, but it might be different if I liked looking in the mirror. "You're like a regular fairy godfather."

Pure, ferocious rage flared to life before Kian shut it down. "Don't call me a fairy. It's risky. Dangerous, even."

Whoa. What the hell.

"I didn't—"

"Wings, sparkle-dust, mischief. Puck, Oberon, Titania, Tir na Nog, land beneath the hill. That about cover it?"

"Uh, yeah."

"If you call some things, they will come. And then they don't leave."

That sounded scary as hell, *and* like a certain noseless supervillain. A shiver went through me. "Noted."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to snap."

"No prob. I got it. Don't call the you-know-whats." I wondered about the rage-flare, whether he'd had a bad experience with things

that didn't go away, but like his almost suicide, I didn't know him well enough to ask.

Maybe someday.

"I should get going." Kian seemed subdued, troubled by his outburst.

I studied him. "Do you . . . live somewhere?"

He looked around my age—eighteen or so—but he must be older. How much depended on what his second and third favors had been. What if he'd asked for eternal youth? He could be like a hundred. *Gross*. He didn't talk like a geriatric, but if he hung around kids a lot, that would keep him current. No matter how hot he was, I couldn't get past that age gap. Not that he wanted me to.

"Yes. I live . . . somewhere." Faint sarcasm flavored his tone. Regardless of how exotic it was to me, this must seem like a dead-end customer service job to him, explaining the rules to new clients and feeling annoyed when they didn't catch on right away.

That didn't mean I was putting up with attitude, even from the guy who pulled me off the bridge. "Later, Kian. See you in two days."

After he left, I went to my room and removed my jacket. Years ago, I'd papered my walls with posters of famous scientists like Madame Curie and Albert Einstein. I had the one with Einstein sticking his tongue out, a reminder that genius should always maintain a sense of humor. I was aware this didn't look like a teenager's room. My desk was too clean, organized by type of supplies, and dominated by the high-end printer/scanner plugged into my laptop.

If I had any friends to invite over, they'd make fun of everything, including the books on floor beside my bed. I was always reading four different volumes, and only one of them was a novel. At the moment, I had a biography of Lise Meitner, a copy of *A Brief History of Time*, half

burying a collection of plays by Samuel Beckett. At the bottom of the pile lay a science fiction novel, too dry to hold my interest.

On my desk, I still had the DNA model I'd built for biology. At work. Other signs of my nerdery dotted the room: laptop, a bag of dice, replica of the Starship *Enterprise*, a Tardis that lit up when you put coins in the slot on top, and some half-painted miniatures. There might be tons of people like me all over the world, but from what I could tell, they didn't go to Blackbriar. If they did, they hid the signs better than I ever had.

I took the rocks out of my pockets and put them in a crate in my closet. On autopilot, I put on pajamas and brushed my teeth. Though I didn't expect to sleep, the nap claimed me quickly and I didn't dream. Well, nothing I remembered anyway, but when I woke, I was oddly stiff and sore, as if the experience had changed me from the inside out. I raised my arms over my head and the marks were still on my wrists. Yet I felt oddly superstitious, like I might be hallucinating.

Coma dream? Dead girl walking? If so, this was the freakiest afterlife ever.

Coming up on my knees, I fought a burst of hysteria and peered at the marks in the mirror on the back of my door: Left wrist, ownership character that looked like a kanji; right wrist, infinity sign with a hash mark across the top. The reflection showed them backward, like they should be. Apart from these symbols and a number in my contacts, I had no proof Kian existed. I rolled out of bed and ran to where my phone was plugged into my laptop, charging. My hands shook as I scrolled through my contacts to the Ks.

You have to be there. I'm not crazy. I'm not.

Then I found it, pushing out a relieved sigh. *Kian. And his number.* Closing my eyes, I pushed out an unsteady breath. Though I had no

idea how it was possible, he'd transported me to a mountaintop in Tibet, then brought me back like it was nothing. I might not understand his mojo, but . . .

It's real. It happened. He's coming back.

Or maybe you're dreaming, doped up in a psych ward, while doctors write stuff in your chart like, "Unresponsive to reality," "Becomes agitated when the sedatives wear off." Oddly, that possibility made it easier to move forward, like doing a high-wire act without a net, certain only that you wouldn't get hurt if you fell.

Reassured, I showered and dressed, then put together an impressive package of false documentation using my laptop, the Internet, Photoshop, and my excellent printer. I felt slightly guilty because my parents wouldn't look too hard at these documents. Why? They trusted me. But this part of the plan hinged on a strong sales pitch, and I had to prove I'd earned a scholarship to the university summer science program.

Just before I left my room, I shrugged into a hoodie to hide my wrists, though the day was warm enough for air-conditioning, if we'd had it. Since it was past noon, my parents were home. Soon, the conference circuit would begin, where they presented research to their colleagues. Once I turned twelve, I'd traveled with them because they didn't mind leaving me in a hotel room while they did their thing, but when I was younger, I stayed with Great-Aunt Edith, who called me her namesake and made me walk her Pomeranian.

"Hello, Edith." Dad looked up from his paper with an absent smile, peering at me down the rims of his spectacles. He'd missed part of his jaw in shaving, so it prickled with graying whiskers. That sort of thing was common.

My mother made a noise to acknowledge my existence, but she

didn't look up from scratching on a yellow legal pad. Bowls of half-eaten gruel congealed in the middle of the table, even though they'd presumably gotten home late enough to eat lunch instead, one of my mom's quirks. She worshiped at the altar of steel-cut oats.

Showtime. I set my papers on the table and pulled out a chair. By joining them, I did something odd and worthy of a pause.

My mother looked up. "Yes?"

You've got one shot. Make it good.

"I wasn't sure if it would come through, so I didn't want to get your hopes up . . . but I've been accepted to the Summer Science Program. Full scholarship."

Quickly I summarized the benefits of academic focus, college credits, and keeping my brain occupied during the summer. My parents seemed to think if I didn't use it for those two months, the thing would liquefy and run out my ears. Doubtless they had assumed I'd trail them around all summer, as had become the custom. But since they never paid weren't paying for another room, maybe they would be glad to have some privacy.

Ew.

My father gave me a questioning look. "You didn't tell us you applied."

"It's pretty competitive. I was afraid you'd be disappointed if I didn't get in "

"But you did . . . and with a full scholarship. Congratulations, darling." Mom leaned toward me and almost hugged me. But she drew up short and offered an awkward pat on the shoulder instead.

"When does it start?" Dad asked.

"In a few days. I know it's short notice, but—"

"Actually, we had been concerned about how much you'd be

alone this summer, even traveling with us. You can only sit through so many symposiums," Dad said.

Mom added, "We'd toyed with the idea of letting you stay home and apply for a job somewhere, but we won't be in Boston much for the next couple of months."

"I wasn't keen on it," Dad admitted.

"You don't trust me?" I pretended to be hurt.

"It's other people I don't trust." His tone was pure cranky.

"So I can go?"

They exchanged a look, beaming information brain to brain and coming to consensus like the Borg.

"Of course," he said. "It's a tremendous opportunity, and we're proud of your initiative."

"Thanks." His praise made me twitch because, of course, I hadn't aimed for better, brighter things. I'd given up. Let the assholes win. The idea lodged in my head, that was so *not okay*. No matter what, I should've kept fighting. I should never have gone to an emotional place where I felt like the bridge offered my best hope.

Never again, I promised myself.

Already, I was better. Stronger. With a goal in sight, I could stand anything.

"Given our conference schedule, this is the best possible outcome for *all* of us. I'm excited for you. Do we need to book your tickets?" Mom asked.

"No, it's all set. Part of the full ride."

She beamed. "You must have really impressed them."

Well, I impressed somebody. Too bad I knew next to nothing about the people Kian worked for, but he seemed to have come out unscathed. I'd take that as my silver lining.

Dad reached over to pat my hand. "It's no secret you've been unhappy at school, and I'm relieved to see you planning for the future. You won't always be surrounded by cretins and knuckle-draggers."

Wow. A small spark of shame went through me. I hadn't realized they noticed my misery. But then, I stayed in my room, mostly. My parents were as weird as I was, and I couldn't take comfort in their company.

Mom nodded. "For people like us, college is the next frontier. This is great, not only for the academics, but this summer, you'll get a glimpse of what the future holds. It's *so* much better than high school."

More guilt, because I intended to abandon their nerd phylum as soon as possible. *For the best reasons*, I told myself. *To give the beautiful people a taste of their own medicine.* I'd get inside enemy lines, then break them down one by one.

"Great job winning over the selection committee," Dad said. "This will look great on college applications in the fall."

He has no idea how apt that is.

I smiled at my parents. "I know. I'm excited they chose me."

SO SVENGALI

The morning I left, my parents tried to see me off. Dad smiled at me, obviously pleased with what he was about to suggest. "We'll go together on the train, have breakfast at the airport, and then we'll say good-bye at security."

Damn. This was a problem I hadn't predicted. "That'll take an hour each way. Don't you guys have to prepare your papers for presentation, pack, and whatever else?"

My mom frowned. "It seems wrong to pat your head and say 'good luck.' What if you run into trouble on the way?"

Seriously?

"I'll be fine, two trains and a shuttle bus." Fortunately, I looked up the route as part of my cover story. "And I don't have much to carry."

They both frowned at me, the long pause making me fear that the situation might become untenable. Kian would likely *not* be amused if I lost half the morning going to the airport and eating breakfast. Once they left, I could probably call him and ask him to meet me

there, but what if they wanted to watch me walk through security? I started to sweat.

"Seriously, it's fine," I murmured. "I need to be independent, right?"

Eventually Dad sighed. "If you're sure. This feels like it's happening too soon."

"Be careful." That came from Mom, along with a recitation of things to look out for. "And text us when you get there safely. Remember, we'll be traveling this summer, but we'll have our cell phones if you need anything."

"Will do . . . and I won't forget. Have a productive summer."

They both gave me stiff, awkward hugs that were more like thumps on the back, then Dad pressed some cash into my hands and they let me go. As I stepped onto the street, my phone buzzed. After skimming the text message, I walked two blocks as requested, and Kian met me on the corner.

"You didn't have any trouble?" he asked.

"Not much. I know how to manage my parents."

Barely.

"Good. This way." He stepped off the main walk into an alley, just a narrow gap between two brick buildings. At the end, there was a green Dumpster and some cardboard boxes. If it wasn't a bright, sunny morning, I'd be seriously freaked out and reconsidering my decision. A little voice whispered that none of this was real anyway, so I might as well enjoy the adventure, one of those super vivid dreams that amazed you when you finally awakened.

"Let's get out of sight." The heat of his fingers tangling with mine stole my voice.

I clung, hoping Kian took it for fear or anticipation. I'd die if he knew I just liked holding his hand.

He didn't speak, but once we rounded the Dumpster, he ported us. I expected to land on the campus, but the world came back into focus inside a small, stylish cabin. If *Architectural Digest* ever sponsored a wilderness retreat, I suspect it would look like this. From the view out of the window, it was built on top of a mountain with a river rushing nearby, different from the precipice he'd taken me to first.

"Where are we?" I yanked my hand free and stumbled back a step.

"Relax. I need a quiet place to work on you. As soon as you're satisfied, we'll continue to the university."

"Right." He couldn't change my face in a diner, even if it was company-owned. Whatever that meant. "But seriously, where are we?"

He lifted his shoulders in a shrug, sheepish. "My place in Colorado. Perk of the job. I can live wherever I want, even if I'm working in Boston."

"Don't you have an office?" I joked.

"I do, but . . ." He trailed off, regarding me intently.

Secretly I was glad he'd brought me home with him. A cubicle with fluorescent lights would quell my delusions that this could be more than business for him. So this must be standard procedure, and I shouldn't get my hopes up. I would have loved to poke into the nooks and crannies of the immaculate rooms in hope of uncovering his secrets, but that would be rude, and he had a job to do.

He canted his head toward the couch, pulling on a pair of odd, sleek gloves with textured pads on each fingertip. "Make yourself comfortable. This might take a while."

Yeah, he had a lot to fix. I hunched my shoulders in misery as I trudged over to the sofa. He sat down right next to me, his

expression softening. God, yuck, I didn't want him feeling sorry for me, even if he did know how I felt.

"Hey, it's not your fault. And I meant it when I said you have a nice smile. More important, you're a good person. I'm just going to make the outside line up with what you have going on up here." He touched my neck, and soothing heat flooded through me.

Immediately, I felt calmer—and suspicious of that shift. "What did you do?"

"I used an electrical impulse to stimulate your hypothalamus, but I can't make the kind of changes you're asking for without a little pain. It'll go smoother if you're not already vibrating with tension."

"How much pain are we talking about?" I pushed out a slow breath, bracing. "And why can't you make it painless? Or knock me out?"

"Normally, a sedative would be administered, but I'm not an anesthesiologist. This procedure is low risk, but administering medication—well, I'm not doing that. You could be allergic, or it might not work on you the way it's supposed to."

When he put it that way, I saw his point. This was close enough to plastic surgery without a license for me to get scared. I breathed deep, wondering if I should back up. But it was too late; the hash mark had already formed atop my infinity symbol. In this deal, there were no do-overs or takebacks.

"I can handle it."

"Let's focus on what you want. How would you like to look?"

"You can make me resemble someone else?"

"Sure. But it's best if I optimize you. People tend to assume minor cosmetic procedures over the summer, weight loss, gym membership. They'll fill in the blanks as long as you don't have a whole new face."

"Then I'd love to be the best possible version of me."

"Okay, let's start with your eyes. I can change the color or brighten them, as well as correct your vision."

"And people will think I got contacts or Lasik surgery."

"Pretty much."

"There's nothing wrong with the color, is there?" It wasn't like I spent any time staring at my own irises.

"No, they're pretty, like the sun through topaz. You just can't see them too well with your glasses on."

Heat washed my cheeks. "You don't have to say stuff like that."

"You think you're a troll, because the people at school made you feel that way, but you have good raw material. You'll be a knockout when we're finished—and without as much structural redesign as you think."

"Then just do it."

He arched a brow. "You don't want to direct me?"

My shoulders squared, and I sucked in a sharp breath, trying to steady my nerves. Though I half suspected I was dreaming, it was terrifying to consider how much power I was giving him. "You're the expert. Just go for the best version of me. I trust you."

Sweetness and surprise flashed in his face. "People don't, usually. I'm just a means to an end."

"The genie in the bottle?"

He touched my cheek so lightly, as if it were eggshell porcelain. "Something like that."

"Let's get going," I said, dropping my eyes.

"One final question . . . what's your ideal body type?"

I'd never thought about it, mostly because I preferred to believe it didn't matter what I looked like, at least it wouldn't with people who

cared about me. Beauty was in the eye of the beholder, right? So all my life, I had been holding out for the day somebody thought I was fine the way I was, but now I was sacrificing that potential for the sake of my plan. My stomach twisted with nerves.

"Slim hourglass, I guess. I always envied girls who look gorgeous in anything."

With great tenderness, he set gloved hands on my face. The heat quickly built to unbearable levels, and soon I was choking back my screams. As he'd hinted, it was like surgery without anesthetic. Tears streamed from my eyes as he stroked shaping fingers down my cheekbones, along my jaw, over my lips and brow. When his thumbs smoothed across my lids, my vision winked out and I followed.

Much later, I awoke . . . and my clothes didn't fit. My muscles burned with a low-grade heat, as if I had been training for a marathon. I lifted a slender, toned arm and marveled at it. Which was when I noticed I didn't have on my glasses. And the world was crystal clear.

"Kian?"

I heard his footsteps on the stairs before I saw him. "How're you feeling?"

"Not bad, considering. Is there a bathroom where I can—"

"Over here." He bounded with an odd, nervous energy that I couldn't interpret, until I realized he was *nervous*. He wanted me to approve of his work. "I left some things for you on the top of the hamper."

Keeping my pants up required one hand pinching in the waist. I minced toward the bathroom and shut the door with a quiet terror that I was crazy. Or dreaming. *You're not. You were chosen.* With glowing exultation, I turned to the mirror to meet the new me.

My mouth dropped open.

I *did not* know the girl in the mirror. I mean, she had a few things in common with the person I had been, but it was like someone had removed most of my imperfections in Photoshop. With shaking fingers, I touched my cheekbones. So many minute changes and refinements. The best plastic surgeons couldn't have done what Kian had with his fingertips. From my small, straight nose to my slightly fuller mouth to the piquant point of my chin, I was the best possible version of myself.

He hadn't stopped at my face. Delicate color flared as I stared, imagining him shaping my body like modeling clay. He'd had no choice but to go all the way to third base to do the job right, and it figured I hadn't been awake. *It's just work for him*, I told myself. *Get over it*. My hair was still long, but the mousy brown had gone. Instead, it held a coppery tinge with streaks of gold and red, giving it a gorgeous luster. I shook my head experimentally and it bounced away from my throat in what seemed like a flirty move. Not that I *had* any moves.

I needed some.

Kian knocked on the bathroom door, sounding anxious. "You okay? If you don't like how you look, I can tweak. It'll hurt, of course, but—"

"Relax," I said. "You give good makeover."

"Thanks."

"Let me get dressed, okay?"

"Sure." His steps moved away.

I went to the neat pile of clothes on top of the tan wicker hamper. When I found underwear and bras at the bottom, I almost died of embarrassment. They were the cute kind like I'd never worn. I chose

a pair of white, pink, and black-striped boyshorts along with the matching bra, then shimmied into my new undies. I had no idea how I would face Kian, knowing he'd bought me underwear, but what the hell, he was so totally my Svengali, that maybe it didn't matter. We were beyond all that. I heard him moving around, pacing it sounded like.

Wow, he's really tense.

I faced my reflection. From the graceful curve of my shoulders to the flat, toned stomach, the mirror showed me a body I didn't recognize and the change was startling, frightening even. Normal weight loss would've given me a chance to get used to being lighter by increments, but I had to get accustomed to all at once. It would take me a while to assimilate my new shape. By societal standards, I definitely qualified as pretty, but it felt like I was looking at a stranger, one whose body I had snatched. Deliberately I turned away. There were a couple of pairs of jeans, one plain, the other spangled with rips and faded spots. Though I'd never worn anything so stylish, I pulled them out of the pile and checked the size.

"Right." I huffed out a skeptical sigh.

Still, my old pants didn't fit, so why not try? I eased them up over my hips, thighs, and then buttoned them. They fit skinny, but they fit. *No way.* Euphoria sparkled through me, a low-grade fizz in my veins as I rummaged through the tops. I chose a black baby-doll T-shirt with white Japanese characters and a pink dot in the middle of the design. This time I didn't check the size before I pulled it on. Shifting, I assessed myself in the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door.

Incredible.

Taking a deep breath, I popped the door open before I could lose

my nerve. Kian stopped, arrested in his progress across the front room. His gaze swept me from head to toe, and then he offered an approving nod.

"Obviously I think you look amazing or I would've kept working. But it's more important what *you* think."

"Perfect. I wouldn't have been able to say, *this is what I want*, but you knew."

"I'm good at seeing the potential," he said quietly. "You have any pain?"

"A little. Nothing dramatic."

"There may be a little blood, nothing to worry about. It's a result of the internal shifting I had to do."

I froze. "*Blood?* Like . . . where?"

"I had some when I brushed my teeth afterward, sometimes. And . . . in the bathroom. You know."

The toilet? Oh my God. My parents would rush me to the hospital. "You swear it's not indicative of hemorrhaging or something?"

"No, it's definitely not. It's just a reaction to the procedure. It'll ease back as your body adapts to the transformation."

"Okay. You haven't lied to me so far, though 'some pain' was a massive understatement. It felt like my whole face was on fire."

"Worth it, though, right?"

I smoothed my hands down my sides and thrilled at the way his green gaze followed the movement. "Definitely."

"I'm glad you passed out. It's pretty awful for people with a higher pain tolerance. They scream the whole time."

"Which is why you bring them out here to the middle of nowhere."

To my surprise, Kian shook his head. "I never bring clients here,

Edie. There's a soundproof room at headquarters set aside for this kind of thing."

"But . . . *I'm* here."

He ducked his head. The copper strands in his hair shone against the black, giving him a burnished look in the morning light. His thick tangle of lashes hid his devastating green eyes, but it was easier for me to ignore his beauty, knowing he'd broken the rules for me. I could look at him and see him. From certain angles, I could almost imagine what he'd looked like before someone set burning fingertips to his face and cut away the flaws. That mental image made him seem much more human, less the divine being who'd plucked me off the bridge. I preferred seeing him as a person, not a god.

His silence wasn't an answer. "Kian. If this isn't protocol, *why* am I here?"

"I was afraid the people at headquarters would freak you out." By the way his eyes shifted away from mine, that wasn't the whole truth.

"Bullshit."

This time, he met my stare head on. "I wanted more time with you."

"Is that allowed?"

"Not really." He ran an agitated hand through his hair. "Just forget it, okay? And before you ask, no, I didn't do anything weird to your unconscious body."

"I wasn't going to ask that." I'd be sore in different places if he had, and while my muscles burned, there was no pain down below.

"So let's get going."

"Wait." I moved toward him and put a hand on his arm. "Do you mean you *like* me? In a normal way. Nothing to do with deals or bargains or favors?"

He shrugged. "It doesn't matter. There are rules."

"The answer matters to *me*."

"For all the good it does either of us, yes, I do. I did before." Bitterness colored his voice, his expression, and I didn't understand why. He'd wished for the *same thing*. Why did he seem to mind changing me for the better?

"Nobody liked me before," I said. "So thank you."

He ignored my gratitude. Maybe I wouldn't want it, either. I tried to put myself in his shoes. How would I feel about the people I met, who were so broken they had been ready to die when I stepped in? It wouldn't be wise to get attached to somebody like that, I thought. Even worse, when you *were* that somebody. *No wonder he's pulling back, minimizing the mistake of showing this much favoritism.* Whatever his motive, I appreciated that he hadn't brought me to headquarters. Intuition told me I wasn't ready to be thrown into the deep end, especially since I wasn't a very good swimmer.

I got out my cell phone, checked the time, compared it with the East Coast, and decided it had been long enough to seem credible that my plane had landed. I texted, Safe and sound on the ground. Thanks for letting me do this.

My mom replied, We're proud of you. Have fun, Edith.

In silence, Kian emptied my backpack and filled it with the things he'd gotten. "There's a gift card in the front zip compartment. You'll have time to buy more clothes before classes start in the morning."

"Oh." I tried not to sound disappointed. "You said *we'd* go, before."

"Yeah, about that. It's not a good idea. You don't need me with you."

But I want you there. I didn't say it aloud. Ever fiber of me knew it was a bad idea to get attached to him. He was like a caseworker, almost.

"All right, thanks. I'll register, drop my bag off at the dorm, and go shopping, I guess." I couldn't believe I'd just spoken those words voluntarily.

"You ready?" A figurative shutter came down in his expression; he was ready to get on with his work.

"Yep."

There was nothing personal about his hand on mine, just a link required to port me on to the last leg in our journey. We emerged in a quiet corner of what must be the quad. A tangle of branches veiled the grass in filtered green light. Kian let go of me and pushed clear from the foliage.

He pointed, his tone all efficiency. "Registration is in that building. Head over and they can take it from here."

"Can I call if I need you?"

"Of course," he said gently. "But you won't. You need to get used to your new look and develop the confidence to demolish the assholes at Blackbriar, come fall."

I took his point. If I called him constantly, that wasn't self-assurance; psychology books would call it codependence. To hide my nervousness, I joked, "It's also to keep my parents from having a heart attack. I hope the summer's long enough for them to believe—"

"Don't worry." He softened a little. "Parents always want to believe their kids are beautiful. It won't seem like a stretch when the time comes, I promise."

"Then I guess that's it."

"Yeah. I won't contact you until the summer program ends."

"You better come then." I tried for a playful tone. "You're my ride home."

"I'll never let you down when you need me, Edie." His tone seemed so somber for a sunny summer day, as if he saw dark things in the distance and me in the center of them.

"Then there's one more thing before you go." I couldn't believe I was doing this, but the words wouldn't stop. They came from a place of complete certainty.

"What?"

"Kiss me."

I didn't give a shit about rules. A girl only got one first, and I suspected it wouldn't take me long to find somebody who wanted to be the one. But I deserved *more* than that for my first kiss. It had to be Kian—who said he liked me before—even though he wasn't allowed to. I was willing to accept that it couldn't go past this point.

"That's a really bad idea," he whispered.

"If you don't want to . . ."

In answer, he stepped closer so I could smell his soap, just touch of citrus, and the warm, sunshiny scent of his skin. He dizzied me. Kian tangled his fingers in my hair and drew me to him with just enough hesitation to make me think he was nervous. That helped on my end, though I still couldn't breathe right. His other hand rested on my hip. I didn't know where to put my arms, if I should press close, stand super still, or—*Oh God. It's a good thing I asked him to do this.*

I'd make a fool of myself with anyone else.

"Eyes shut," he breathed in my ear.

I closed them and turned my face up. A trill of pleasure radiated wherever he touched me. Then Kian brushed his lips against mine, and the world stopped.

For this moment, I only knew his heat, his heartbeat. His mouth tasted sweet and lush, like chai tea and cinnamon, and I rose up against

him on my tiptoes to sink my hands into his layered hair. This wasn't a perfunctory kiss—no, it was so much more. He caught me against him, and I lost track everything but Kian. His hands burned through the thin cotton of my tee, roaming my back. For someone who had never been kissed, this was like learning to swim by being thrown off a boat into the ocean.

I couldn't think. Couldn't breathe. His nearness reacted on me like a drug, and I clung, wanting only more. Forever, more. Eventually, I registered the hooting behind us in the quad. Fierce heat flashed into my cheeks as I pulled back.

"Something to remember me by." His tone carried a low and lovely ache, as if those moments meant something to him, as if he worried about me forgetting him.

Like that could ever happen.

"I'll see you in six weeks."

"Okay. What time?"

"Let's say eight, West Coast time."

I nodded. "Thanks for everything."

His jade gaze swept me from head to toe, as if committing me to memory. Then he stepped back. The leafy foliage hid his vanishing act, but the air crackled after he went, like charged wind after a storm.

I ached for him already.

A STITCH IN TIME

Going forward, I'd control everything this summer, taking charge of my life just like I had by asking Kian for my first kiss. That resolve made me feel better about being thrown into a college credit program with minimal preparation.

You can do this.

As I strolled toward the red-and-white registration banner, a girl fell into step beside me. She seemed . . . nervous, gnawing at her lip with oversize front teeth. Her mouth was chapped; her hair was dull and needed trimming. And before this morning, she would've considered herself too cool to be seen with me. At least that was my experience; even loners and outcasts preferred not to risk my social contagion because hanging out with me wasn't worth the potential grief from the Teflon crew. But maybe my Blackbriar experience wouldn't repeat here; there was no way this girl could know I had been a pariah.

"Was that your boyfriend?" she ventured, as if I might slap her for speaking to me.

At Blackbriar, this would be a nonstarter, a definite faux pas. People who looked like me did *not* hang out with those who looked like her. But here at the science program, that didn't matter—and I would never crush someone like they had me.

"Nah. Just a guy." That seemed like the kind of thing the new Edie would say.

One who saved my life.

Who liked me before.

"Really?"

"We haven't known each other that long." Surprising and true.

The other girl's eyes widened at that revelation. "But you were kissing."

Somehow I managed a shrug. "I was curious."

My companion didn't know what to say to that, clearly. "Wow."

"Are you part of the science program?" I figured it was better to change the subject because there were so few things I could reasonably say about Kian. Hell, I didn't even know his last name.

"Yeah. I guess you go to school here?"

I shook my head. "I'm heading over to registration myself."

"I never would've guessed." She wore a near-comical expression of disbelief, and if I'd been born with *this* version of my face, along with my brain, I'd find her incredulity offensive. It must suck for smart, pretty girls not to be taken seriously.

"Why?" I dared her to say it out loud.

"Y-you just don't look like the type," she stammered.

Sympathy washed over me. Hours before, I'd been living this girl's life. *Worse*, most likely. "Yeah, well. Looks can be deceiving. I'm Edie."

Belatedly, I realized I hadn't stuttered once. Apparently the

behavioral psychologist had been right; I had a psychogenic stutter, exacerbated by stress, mental anguish, and anxiety. Right then, I felt no fear of ridicule, and it was easy to talk.

"Viola. Vi," she amended quickly.

I guessed she didn't want to be known here as the girl whose parents named her after the cross-dresser in *Twelfth Night*. She'd probably be surprised I knew that. I'd seen every film version ever produced, though, including the one with Amanda Bynes and Channing Tatum. That was the last movie of hers I loved.

"Did you come a long way?" I asked.

"I'm from Ohio, so yeah." She went on, "It's cool that I met someone nice my first day. I was a little worried about coming by myself. None of my friends got in."

At least you have some, I thought.

I got in line behind a guy who couldn't stop playing with his smartphone. Everyone at Blackbriar had them, but my cell was cheap and primitive, just so I could text my parents. Though they never said so, they couldn't see the point of buying me an expensive phone when I had nobody else to call.

Vi stood behind me, fidgeting until I turned around, aiming a look at her. She flushed. "Sorry. I'm just nervous about meeting so many new people."

"Me too." I just wasn't showing it at the moment.

"Really? You seem so confident."

Because I'd never see her after this summer, I could be honest. "It's a front."

The line moved pretty fast. There were five people helping out, and they'd divided up the alphabet. I went over to the guy in charge of the Ks, beckoning Viola to follow me. He was probably a volunteer

from the university. His brown hair held a red tinge, and he had a million freckles.

"Name?" he asked.

"Edie Kramer." There was no way Kian would've registered me under a name I hated.

He drew his finger down the list. "Ah, here you are. Wow, you're lucky."

"I am?"

"Yep, you slid right in under the wire. We had a last-minute cancellation."

"What happened to free me up a slot?" An icy chill suffused my skin.

I wondered if Kian had done something to the person whose place I'd taken. Though he'd promised he wouldn't make *my* life worse, he'd said nothing about anyone else. "The Monkey's Paw" flickered in my mind, troubling me. Every too-good-to-be-true situation had a dark side, so I needed to figure out what the catch was—and fast.

"Dunno."

"Really? There's no note in my file?" I tried a smile, feeling like a dipshit. My stomach twisted into a knot. In the past, I'd never have tried to charm my way into anything; my personal charisma wouldn't have filled a thimble.

He hesitated, then flipped a few pages. "Looks like he was in an accident, broke his leg or something. When he cancelled, they pulled you off the waiting list."

"Some people have all the luck," Vi said.

I didn't before. "Thanks for telling me."

"No problem. So here's your registration packet and your dorm keys. You'll need the first for the front door of your residence hall

and the other for the room. Room assignment is in the small white envelope. You also need to check in with your RA before the end of the day. She'll go over rules and curfew."

"I was wondering if I could room with my friend, Vi," I said, trying the persuasive smile for a second time.

Life can't be this easy for the beautiful people.

"The rooms are already assigned," he said.

A rule that I can't get around? The old me would've accepted his reply, but if I wanted to be accepted by the Teflon crew, I had to assimilate. So I imagined what Brittany or Allison would do. To have any hope of beating them, first I had to master their weapons of mass destruction.

So I made eye contact, opened mine a little wider, and leaned forward. "But I didn't know Vi was going to be here until just now." Totally true, as we'd just met. "Please, can't you make an exception?"

He weakened visibly. "Let me check the master lists. If your roommates haven't arrived yet, I can swap the names. No harm done."

"Fingers crossed," I whispered to Vi, who seemed astonished and pleased.

A few minutes later, he came back with Vi's packet as well. "They aren't here yet, so they can room together when they arrive."

"Too cool," I said. "Thanks."

As triumph washed over me, I also felt like I needed a shower. *Do those girls have no souls?* I didn't know if I could do this for long, but it seemed to be second nature for them. They considered their ability to control other people an accessory, like a great purse or a cute pair of shoes.

Vi took her envelope as I headed across the quad. "I can't believe that worked!"

"I wasn't sure it would." Especially since I had no experience with manipulation. But I'd watched it happen often enough. Mimicry wasn't tough, apparently.

"This rocks. We're on the fourth floor, it looks like."

"Let's go meet the RA and get that over with."

"Sounds good."

I crossed the quad, which was all green grass and stately trees, to a tall brick building. Two sets of double doors led into what reminded me of a hostel lobby with a rudimentary front desk and a few grubby chairs. A college girl worked behind the counter, answering questions and explaining how the mail situation worked. From there, I ran up four flights, curious how my new body would respond. It didn't leave me short of breath at all, which meant I'd have to work out to keep fit, and I was curious if I'd enjoy doing so, starting from *this* baseline instead of where I was before.

Our RA was all of twenty-one, curly blond hair, good teeth. She looked like a surfer girl, and she seemed laid back, which boded well. Her idea of going over the rules involved handing us a printout. She ended her short spiel with a grin. "If you *do* decide to break the rules, be smart. Don't let me catch you." At Vi's expression, her smile widened. "Hey, I was sixteen not long ago. I'm not going to pretend I don't remember what it was like."

On the way to the room, Vi bounced with excitement. "This is the most unleashed I've ever been. My parents . . ." She shook her head, words failing her in relation to their strictness. "This will be the best summer ever."

"I hope so."

I unlocked our door and found a simple, Z-shaped space, which gave privacy to each bed. In the middle, there was a double desk, and

opposite, we had a dual dresser with drawers on each side. Across from my bunk, I had a closet, and behind the door, we had a sink for washing up. Otherwise, that was it. The walls were cement block and had been painted light blue; the floor was industrial tile, white-speckled with a few interesting stains. I dropped my backpack on the single bed, drawing Vi's attention.

"Is that *all* you brought?" she asked.

Nodding, I dug out the Visa gift card from the front compartment. "My parents thought it'd be fun for me to get stuff here, kind of a belated birthday present."

"Oh my God, that's the coolest thing ever. Your parents are nothing like mine."

I bet they're just like yours. But it was such a white lie; what could it hurt? Easier than explaining a hot guy who saved my life had given me \$500 to spend on whatever I wanted. I pulled out my laptop and plugged it into the university Internet. A few minutes later, I had directions to the nearest mall.

"You wanna come?"

"Shopping?" She glanced at her baggy jeans and wrinkled her nose. "That's not really my thing."

"We can find a bookstore and a Best Buy, too."

I *knew* this girl. I'd been her this morning. The old Edie never went clothes shopping voluntarily. She let her mother buy things and stick them in her room. She wore whatever she found and tried not to think about how she looked. She avoided mirrors and kept her hair so long, it fell into her face. When she walked down the street, she watched her feet, so she didn't see scorn flicker in other people's faces as their eyes slid away. That Edie died on the bridge. I had the

freedom to be someone else now, anyone I wanted. The sensation was brilliant but terrifying. If I got it wrong, I had nobody to blame but myself.

"When you put it *that way*," Vi said, grinning.

"Cool. There's a mixer tonight at eight. We'll be back before then."

Her smile faded. "I don't know if I'm gonna go. I'm not here to socialize."

"That's your parents talking. We're here to learn, but we can have fun, too. That's why I came." That played better than the real explanation, which no sane person would believe.

Vi shot me a knowing look. "But not the reason you gave at home, I bet."

"Hell, no. You have to know how to manage the parental units. As long as you can work up a rationale consistent with their internal motivations, you're good to go."

"I'm gonna learn *so much* from you."

"Maybe." With a half shrug, I headed for the door.

The mall I'd found was located downtown, kind of a revitalized ultra-chic place with small boutiques, lots of flowers and Spanish-style courtyards. There were staple department stores, of course, like Macy's and Nordstrom, but I wouldn't be shopping there. Instead I'd hit smaller, lower-priced places. It shouldn't cost too much for jeans and T-shirts. At this point, I wasn't sure enough of my fashion sense to go much beyond those parameters. Deep down, I wished Kian hadn't refused to come with me. He had great taste, cool and elegant, and I'd bet he could dress me perfectly. Maybe that was why he didn't want to do it, though. He'd already made me beautiful.

Anything more might make him feel proprietary, give him a disquieting sense of ownership. I probably shouldn't have asked him to kiss me.

I wasn't sorry I had.

Vi made a noncommittal shopping buddy. She had no opinions on anything I tried on, but I caught a wistful light in her eyes, once or twice. I wanted to tell her how well I understood, but nobody wanted a new acquaintance prying into their personal business. I wouldn't make it better by saying I'd been a "before" picture, too. So I kept a light commentary running on what I intended to buy.

By the end of the spree, I spent four hundred bucks on clothes and cosmetics, forty on a small suitcase to hold it all. I also had the cash my dad had given me, which left me just under a hundred for the rest of the summer. That should be good for random entertainments. From the curriculum, I saw we'd be busy doing telescopic observation of various constellations anyway, so it wasn't like I'd be out on the town every night.

Vi and I ate a quick meal at the food court, and then I kept my promise to locate the nearest bookstore. In the stacks, I browsed for an hour, but I only bought one book: *The Intelligent Negotiator: What to Say, What to Do, How to Get What You Want—Every Time*. The purchase set the seal on my intentions. This summer would be my proving ground.

My new roommate bought a handful of science fiction and fantasy titles. I'd read all of them but one. I touched the second book in her stack. "That one's the best."

"I'll read it first."

Since it was after seven by then, we headed back to campus. Vi fell quiet as we approached the dorm; I could tell she'd rather avoid

the mixer altogether. It was a wonder she'd gotten up the nerve to speak to me earlier. But then, I totally understood how one new person felt less intimidating than a roomful of strangers. My stomach churned over the prospect too, but I'd master my fear like a differential equation.

In our room, I didn't change clothes. I brushed my hair and teeth, put on some makeup like the girl in the store had explained. Not a lot. I wasn't confident enough to try advanced tricks, and fortunately, the face Kian had given me didn't require it. Your *face*, a small voice reminded me.

"Ready?" I asked.

She put down her book with a soft sigh. "Not really. But I guess I should go for a while. If it's awful, I can come back up and read."

"Come on, it'll be fun."

On the third floor, the gathering was already in full swing. Some kids looked geeky; others seemed normal. A few were hot. I skimmed the crowd and saw how it had broken down. Techies were comparing toys. Stargazers stood by the windows. A few math types scribbled on napkins. Music played in the background, soft and inoffensive, and the organizers had laid out various canned drinks and cookies. Not much of a spread, but the point was for enrollees to make first contact.

Before I could make up my mind where to enter the mix, a Japanese boy with a shock of black, blond-tipped spiky hair came up to me. He pointed at my shirt. "Are you really?"

I cocked a brow, waiting, trying to look mysterious, because I had no idea what my tee said. I'd just liked the look of it. And how it fit me.

He asked outright, "'Looking for a Japanese boyfriend'?"

Crap. Is that what it says?

I gave him a half smile, praying I didn't blush, because I felt like such a dumbass. *Did Kian get this as a practical joke?*

"Why, are you applying?"

"Maybe." He flashed a smile that said he was a little more self-assured than most of the guys here. "I'm Ryuuto. But Ryu is fine."

"I'm Edie. This is Vi." I stepped sideways so he could see her since she was hiding behind me. She elbowed me to show she didn't appreciate the attention.

She squeaked out, "Nice to meet you."

Come on, Vi. You can do better than that.

But Ryu wasn't paying attention to either of us. He curled his fingers, calling someone else over, a boy with dark blond hair. With his gold, wire-framed glasses, he looked smart . . . and cute. "This is my roommate, Seth. Seth, Edie and Vi."

"Trust Ryu to find the girls right off." Seth had an easy manner, belied by the flicker of his eyes. That was the only cue he gave that he wasn't totally calm.

"We're not the only girls here," I pointed out.

The blond kid grinned. "The ones who'll talk to us?"

"Point," Ryu admitted. "But I figured the shirt was a sign."

I studied Seth. "Programming?"

He nodded. "What gave me away? I'm interested in pretty much all the hard sciences, though. I haven't made up my mind on a major yet."

"Why rush?"

Ryu nudged his roomie. "Let's get them some drinks?"

As they moved off, Vi drew in a deep breath, covered by the music. "I can't believe this is happening. Boys just wander over to you?"

They never did before.

"It's the shirt. Great icebreaker."

And maybe that's why Kian bought it.

She shook her head. "It's because you're gorgeous. I can't do this!"

"Relax," I whispered. "Here they come."

This was all new to me, too, but I could learn. I had to. Ryu returned with the drinks and Seth brought cookies. The four of us found some chairs in the corner where we could chill. Vi hadn't spoken a word to the boys, and I could tell by her face that she dug Seth. Maybe we could make that happen by the end of the session.

Ryu was saying, "You ordered your shirt from ThinkGeek, right?"

I nodded, mostly because I had no idea where Kian had gotten it. Fortunately, I was familiar with the store. I'd bought things there before.

"I love ThinkGeek," Seth put in. "I want some of their spy stuff."

"To make stalking easier?" Ryu grinned.

"Shut up!"

Man, I had to get Vi into this conversation. I leaned toward her. "What about you? Ever ordered from TG?"

She shot me a look, but answered, "Yeah, a portable solar charger."

Immediately, both guys turned to her with interest in the specs, whether it was strong enough for a laptop or just an iPod. She fielded their questions with obvious relief; this was something she could discuss. Oddly, her nerves made mine go away because I could see I had nothing to fear.

Vi was right; this was going to be the best summer ever.