

Cloak of Deceit

New Adult Urban Fantasy Romance
December 2014 Excerpt – © Gwen Mitchell

Chapter One

Everyone has a vice – something they know is bad for them, but they do anyway. Since the third grade, mine had been boys. I managed to live up to my mother's expectations in every other area of my life. I was a star student and athlete, accepted to a prestigious pre-med program, and spent too much time studying and working out to get into any serious trouble. Life was going according to plan, except that I couldn't get past two dates with any of the duds Mom pre-approved. I had a craving for more edge, and it usually led me to the men that would hurt me the most.

The latest example was an on-again, off-again thrill-seeking hellion named Cody. According to my mother, he had a bad track record, bad manners, and no future prospects. According to me, he was exciting, easy-going, and we had wickedly hot sex. So it was really going to piss me off if she turned out to be right again.

He had dodged my texts and calls all week.

Most girls would hole up in their dorm rooms eating double fudge brownie ice-cream and watching a marathon of Jane Austen movies. Instead, I was spending my twenty-first birthday scouring the local freak show – some dark wave punk club called the Sweat Shop that featured an underground “dungeon” – for my supposed boyfriend. He'd been spending a lot of time there the past few months, drawn in to the bondage scene. I had been underage, until tonight.

In an attempt to shake my homegrown look, I'd dyed my forgettable brown hair a glitzy, sex-kitten auburn. Add to that three-inch spike-heeled boots, a black leather skirt, and extreme make-up. As long as I remembered not to smile and show off my dimples, I was five feet nine inches of badass babe.

Cody wouldn't know what hit him.

I emerged from the main entry of the club to find myself on a narrow grated catwalk thirty feet in the air. My hand instinctively shot out for the railing as I hissed in a breath. I could deal with a new wardrobe, a new venue, even some extra kink, but I *really* hated heights.

The bass beats from below shook the railing, which I clung to with a white-knuckled grip. I couldn't see the dance floor. The strobe lights and fog machine distorted the crowd, but I could smell the mass of humanity below me, almost taste the unmistakable pungent mist of sweat and sex mingled with the sour reek of alcohol.

I gulped, fighting vertigo.

A gang of people clamored towards me, most of them wearing more tattoos and piercings than clothing. The grate at my feet shivered.

With a muttered curse, I pressed my butt to the railing, holding on for dear life and squeezing my eyes shut. I didn't open them, even as hands skirted over my bare belly. I must have missed the “Prepare to be Groped” sign on the door.

Once centered on the platform again, I kept moving, dodging to one side or the other when people got obnoxious. I was almost to the stairs at the other end. The goal was in sight. Excited to be through the gauntlet, I sped up.

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One of my heels caught the grating. I took three lunging steps and managed not to fall, but then I bumped off of a tattooed hunk of muscle like a pinball, staggered back, and lost my balance. I tilted backward over the railing. My arms flailed for something to grab onto. A scream of terror caught in my throat.

For one stretched out second of panic, a flipbook of all the stupid things I'd done in my life played out in my mind. This one was right at the top: *death by trampy boots*.

But instead of letting me become a cautionary tale, someone encircled my arm with a firm grip and righted me.

I glanced over my shoulder at the drop that had almost been my untimely finale, and gulped, my heart thumping so hard I choked on my pulse. I took a deep breath and held it as I gazed up at my tall savior.

Yowza.

He was bronze-skinned, with glossy black hair falling carelessly over rich brown eyes, and sculpted features more towards the severe end of the scale. I forgot not to smile. His grip on my arm eased, wide lips curving ever so slightly at the corners.

“All right?” His voice was like thick, dark honey. If I hadn't been watching his lips so intently, I wouldn't have known what he said over the blaring music, only that the tone of it warmed the pit of my stomach and made my mouth water. Adrenaline and humiliation warred in my body, making my tongue too thick to speak. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled.

I nodded, and he let go of me.

“Try to be more careful.” He dismissed me and leaned over to rest his elbows on the railing, a watered-down drink in his other hand. He'd rescued me without spilling a drop. My hero.

“Th-thank you.” I temporarily forgot the part about being suspended in midair.

Mr. Tall, Dark, and Beautiful nodded once and then scanned the room at large as if it presented something far more interesting than me. I noticed a curved scar over his right cheekbone, and he instantly down-shifted from sexy to sexy-and-dangerous. Bad combination for me.

My heart went pitter-pat as I tried to think of something more to say, but he proceeded to ignore me. As the rush of adrenaline wore off, my body remembered I was still three stories up. I grabbed my pride by the boot zippers and slinked away. The twisting grated staircase down had me sweating, but I kept it together through sheer willpower.

When I finally got my feet on solid ground, I collapsed against a wall plastered with concert posters and panted out the rest of my nerves. What the hell was I doing there?

Oh right – Cody. *Bastard*.

If he hadn't been the only guy I'd ever almost-loved, I could have hated him just then. Why hadn't he just answered my calls? I peered through the fog of bodies and black leather. How was I going to find him? I suddenly felt like a

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rabbit caught in a clearing, surrounded by hungry wolves. I had too much of my virgin flesh out on display. My jacket helped some, but my skin kept trying to crawl away from me and hide.

I glanced up at the catwalk – I couldn't help myself. My savior still leaned in his ankle-length black coat. A world away, yet part of the scenery. How did people not notice him? I couldn't decide if it was his looks or just how he projected himself, but to me he was the sort of eye-candy that could rot my brain out. As if he'd heard me, he turned his head. The intensity in his dark eyes, even from fifty feet away, made my neck prickle again. It could have been the danger part, or the sexy part. They both tingled the same to me. The feeling dissipated when his gaze slid away.

I shook off the feeling and shouldered my way up to the bar, searching for Cody's blue eyes in a sea of studs and rings and mohawks. Maybe a drink would help. Maybe several. Coming alone hadn't been one of my more brilliant plans. I should have pulled the female solidarity card and made Theresa come with me, but I knew she would turn it into an opportunity to point out what a waste of time Cody was. I got enough of the what-are-you-doing-with-your-life lectures from my mother. It was my *birthday*. I was supposed to be cutting loose. As the lightning-fast bartender zipped past me for the third time, I hollered for a tequila shot. It was the only alcohol I'd ever tried before.

"She'll have a Pit Viper." A guy behind me slapped down a ten. His other hand slid under my jacket and across my bare lower back.

I gasped and jerked away, breaking out in goosebumps as I turned toward the newest target for my pent-up frustration. "No thanks!"

He smirked.

"Cody!" I threw myself against him. He caught me in a halfway hug, his fingers dancing over my sides. I gazed up at him, my brush with death forgotten. He looked gorgeous, as usual, in a tight black t-shirt and dark jeans. That mischievous smile. Cornflower blue eyes, with the familiar crinkle at the corners.

"Nice digs, sweetness." He looked me up and down and twisted a lock of my new red in his fingers. "Do something with your hair?"

"You're such an ass." I hid my smile by burying my face in his chest. He deserved my ire for leaving me to dangle myself out on this limb, but now that he was here to catch me, I was so relieved I couldn't be mad at him anymore.

Cody laughed. "Did you come all the way down here just to tell me I'm an ass?"

"Yeah." My hands slid into his back pockets, feeling the ass I was really interested in. "You wouldn't pick up your damn phone."

The humor dropped from his face. He pulled away from me to pat himself down, then shrugged. "Must have lost it."

"You lost your phone? Seriously? When did that happen?" Maybe he hadn't been avoiding me like I'd thought. I grabbed the Big-Gulp sized cup from the bar and took a sip of the vibrant red concoction. An explosion of sour fizziness with a bitter cherry chaser rioted down my throat.

Cody took my hand and dragged me through the outskirts of the main

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dance floor.

“You do realize it’s my birthday, right?”

“Of course.” He squeezed my hand. “I have a surprise for you.”

I was still coughing as Cody guided us into one of the side tunnels of the club, leading to a set of attached rooms and several smaller dance floors. He pulled me down a narrow cement stairway.

“Where are we going?” The Pit Viper had less venom once your tonsils adjusted to the assault. Cody ignored me, moving through a maze of dark, sticky-floored hallways like he had a destination in mind.

Thumping bass shook the walls around us, but the crowd thinned. The music grew distant. We passed by two rooms guarded on the outside by club bouncers. I peered into one of them through a crack in the doorway and glimpsed a half-naked man chained to a wall, his bare back covered in welts and small cuts. The snap of something sharp hitting skin made me grip Cody’s hand tighter. Where was he taking me? What sort of place was this, really?

My stomach fluttered with a punch bowl of nerves, excitement, and alcohol. I finished the drink and set the cup down.

Cody took me around another blind corner and then ducked behind heavy curtains and into an alcove. Shackles dangled from the wall. One bare red bulb glowed from the ceiling. My heart raced a little faster, my ears ringing. I wanted this, wanted Cody so much, but for a second I thought I might be in over my head. It wouldn’t be the first time my libido had led me astray.

“Ummm...Cody?”

He yanked me forward and pressed me against the nearest wall, his breath hot against my skin. “I’m so glad you came, Lex. It’s such a rush. You’re gonna love it.”

His mouth on me was all the rush I needed. Cody was nothing like the Polo-wearing, tennis-playing bores my mother wanted me to date. He was all passion. Desire. Intensity. No consequences – he saw what he wanted and he took it. I’d never been with a guy like that before, and he’d uncovered a part of myself I wanted to taste more of. I felt like a different person when I was with him. Someone unpredictable and exciting. Free.

Now, with him so close, I didn’t care if I was in over my head. I’d wanted to celebrate my birthday with a bang, and I knew with him this would be a night I’d never forget.

I pressed my hips against his. “I missed you.”

“I knew you would come to me.” His smile darkened in a way that made me shiver with anticipation, and maybe a little fear. Was I ready for this?

His lips slid over mine, a teasing caress. Cody’s kisses were like a drug, and I was a junkie getting her first fix in weeks.

I ran my fingers through his soft, feathery hair, and hiked one leg around him. His tongue swirled in my mouth, a wash of tangy bliss. He pulled back, leaving me breathless, my lips tingling. His pupils dilated as he looked down at me. There was only a faint ring of blue on the outside, made violet in the red light.

That smile again, as his hands slid over my shoulders, shoving my jacket

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off, then smoothed across the tops of my breasts. “Have you ever had that dream where you’re falling?”

“Yeah.” I moaned as one of his hands dipped into my top and caressed me. The other grabbed my thigh and hauled me closer. *So ready.*

“It’s like that, but you don’t have to wake up, or ever hit bottom.” He ground me into the wall. I could feel how hard he was through his jeans. His licking and kissing grew into a devouring of my flesh, sucking and nibbling until I cried out and pressed back against him like the wanton sex creature I was pretending to be tonight.

“God, Lex, you’re making me so hard,” he growled.

All the heat in my body rushed to front and center at those words. My head swam, and I couldn’t tell if it was the Pit Viper or the Cody-high. Either way, I wanted more. I pulled him closer. He throbbed against me through a scant two layers of clothing, still too far away.

His next kiss wasn’t meant to tease. It was full of the demanding intensity that walked the razor’s edge of obsession – exactly what I’d been craving. I whimpered as his grinding became more insistent. The sudden desire wracking through me bordered on an actual physical withdrawal. I didn’t care about anything else in that moment but getting as close to Cody as humanly possible. Maybe I should have been scared by the thought, but my logic was unraveling too fast under the influence of that drink and Cody’s attentions.

Not to mention the rush of giving myself over to it, of not thinking. That was the release I really needed. I usually thought too much. Never with him.

He reached under my skirt. One finger slid along my thong, and his palm pressed against me. The room spun. His touch had never felt so good before, like I was on fire inside and would burn up if he stopped. Any leftover inhibitions – not that I had many when it came to Cody and sex – disintegrated to ash.

In a move that surprised even me, I took hold of the chains on the wall and wrapped both legs around him, arching my back.

Cody hissed, rubbing my own wetness against me. “I want you so bad.”

“Then take me.” I threw my head back, pressing my breasts against him.

Please! I think I’ll die if you don’t.

... What the hell was in that drink?

One finger slid inside me as his mouth latched onto my neck.

A burst of sparkles exploded behind my eyelids. Fire raged through my veins, and only Cody’s ministrations seemed to cool it. I needed more of him, more than his mouth on my skin, more of him filling me up. I gulped for air. The room felt stifling. My skin broke out in a sweat. But all I could say was, “More.”

He dug his teeth into me harder. I felt a pinch of pain, and then the biggest head-rush *ever* pounded me. I was sucked through a vacuum into an alternate dimension of ecstasy. It was a full-body orgasm that echoed through every cell. And he was still wearing his pants.

Whoa.

Gravity ceased to exist, so did sound. Cody was everywhere. His cool, salty smell filled my nose. I felt him inside and all around me. My toes and

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fingers tingled until they went numb. I dropped the chains, but he held me there, his mouth locked on my throat. My head lolled to one side and I moaned, completely content, blissfully detached from everything that wasn't Cody. I blinked my eyes open a couple of times, but the room blurred and faded from black, to white, to red.

"Cody." It wasn't a question or a statement, just the only thought I could form. All strength seeped from my limbs. My heartbeat echoed loud in my ears. I tried to tell him when I saw a silhouette in the opening to the alcove, but then my vision flashed white again.

A loud voice struck my ears and bombarded the inside of my skull. Cody dropped my leg and backed away. I slid down the wall, slumping sideways.

My breaths were shallow and fast as I sat there wondering why I was on the filthy floor, and why it was tilting back and forth.

"You damned fool!" the voice rumbled overhead. Someone picked me up and propped me against the wall. One large hand pressed against my chest, another lifted my chin. I blinked my eyes open and found my mystery man from earlier studying me, an unreadable look on his face.

"Fancy meeting you here." I smiled, lazy and euphoric. The rest of my body tingled now, not just my fingers and toes. Tiny shocks prickled over my skin, everywhere except where the warmth of his palm seeped into me. My stomach gave a giddy flutter.

I followed the stranger's gaze to see my sort-of boyfriend eyeing him with a mixture of anger and worry. *Cody*. He was so pretty, with his frosty hair, purple eyes...red, red lips.

I didn't realize I'd spoken out loud until the stranger said, "She's in shock."

"Nah, I think I'm just wasted," I slurred. "It's my twenty-first birthday and I've never been drink-drunk...drunk before."

"I could have your Sponsor's head for this. I suggest you inform her of what you've done before I do. The punishment will be less severe."

"I can take care of Lex." Cody's lip curled. "She's mine now."

"Cody?" I looked from one to the other of them.

The stranger wrapped an arm around my waist and hoisted me up higher, grumbling something too low for me to hear. I instinctively started to relax into his strong arms, then snapped slightly more alert.

Wait...who? What sponsor? Was Cody in AA? And why were we wasting time talking to this guy? I wanted to speak up, to reach out, but my voice was as wispy and thin as my train of thought, and my arms felt like Jell-O.

"It's okay, Lex." Cody glared back, the two of them locked in some silent macho bullshit. "He'll get you home."

He ignored my huff of protest and backed towards the curtained doorway.

"Home? But I just got here! We didn't even dance yet!" A giggle erupted from my mouth at the thought of what we'd been doing instead. Damn Pit Viper. Why would people drink those voluntarily?

"I have to go, Lex."

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“Go?” I closed my eyes, swallowing hard as the world warbled. What the hell? Why did he always leave me hanging? When I opened my eyes again, Cody had gone. The mystery man pressed his hand to my forehead. Concern didn’t look as sexy on him as mysterious and brooding.

“What a killjoy.” I threw my arms over his shoulders in rebellion. “I guess you’re my dance partner for the night.”

He shook his head and tried to slide away. “There won’t be any dancing, I’m afraid.”

“You’re afraid?” I teased, locking my hands around his neck. “Of little ol’ me? I don’t bite.”

He paused, frowning down at me, his chiseled features gone stern.

I realized too late that I was rubbing against him, my inhibitions and common sense still on hiatus. *Good riddance*, I thought, leaning closer to my sexy rescuer. He felt warm, and smelled like whiskey and leather, with an under-layer of spicy male deliciousness.

His hands gripped my waist, and my stomach did a happy flip, but then he pushed me away and stared at my face.

“I’m not afraid of anything,” he answered in a low, warning tone, “but you should be.”

“You’re probably right. But I don’t feel anything at the moment.” Which was what I had wanted, wasn’t it? To escape my predictable little world for a night? I leaned my head against the wall and slumped down. A part of me still wanted to party all night and burn off the tempest of un-tapped lust Cody had conjured, but my body was clearly not going to cooperate.

He caught me and slid a knee between my legs to brace me up. His hands brushed lightly up my arms, making me shiver, then pinned my shoulders. He turned my head to the side, baring my neck. I felt a dull ache with the movement, but stayed boneless in his grip, like a kitten grabbed by the scruff.

“Maybe it didn’t take,” the stranger whispered from inches away. “You haven’t passed out yet. You might make it.”

I tried to open my eyes and look at him, to ask him what was wrong, and what that meant. It was too much effort. I slumped forward onto his shoulder.

He shook me back upright. “Lexi, is that your name?”

“Alex.” The answer fell out of my mouth. I felt like my head might roll off my body if he shook me again.

“Alex, you have to get out of here and go home. Can you walk?” He let go of me in experiment.

I started to sink down the wall again. “Maybe later. I just need to lay down for a minute.”

He caught me and hefted me into his arms.

I wrapped mine around him, tucking my head under his chin. My whole body was shivering now, like I was burning up with fever. Where was my jacket? I squinted, only half-aware of the music growing louder. I let my eyes flutter closed and swallowed down the dizziness as we wound our way up and up the curvy stairs. Had there been that many stairs on the way down? The rumble of my

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savior's voice lulled me as he carried me through the bustling crowd, across the catwalk of death, and into the cold fresh outside air. I didn't know what he was saying, but just the tone could put me in a trance.

He set me down on a soft, comfy cushion, and then searched through my pockets.

"Prewitt Hall in the university district," he said from far away. I heard a loud bang.

"Hey, that's where I live." I snuggled deeper into the musty-smelling cushion and fell asleep.

"Prewitt Hall, miss. Miss." A cold hand shook my knee. I shot awake and scrambled back from the driver who was leaning over his seat. Both of his heads swam in my vision.

Head – ouch.

I squeezed mine, feeling like two hot poker had been embedded in either side. I fumbled for the door handle, lurched out onto the sidewalk, and fell flat on my ass.

Pit Viper? They should call it the Sledge Hammer. I was going to kill Cody for giving it to me, and for leaving me like that. *Dirtbag.*

The door slammed, and I opened my eyes just as the black sedan screeched away from the curb.

"Jerk." I crawled on hands and knees towards the dormitory steps. I only made it halfway before puking my guts up in a bright red puddle.

This was one of those moments where you're supposed to re-think your choices in life. Unfortunately, I was too close to passing out to think about anything but my bed. An eternity later, I reached the second floor hallway and sank to the matted carpet outside my dorm-room.

I searched my pockets, banged my head against the door, then regretted it.

"Fuck!" No keys on me. They were in my jacket, lost somewhere in the den of depravity. I either had to wake Theresa up, or sleep in the hallway. I would never hear the end of this.

Happy Birthday to me.

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Chapter Two

I woke in a cold sweat, feeling as if I'd spent the night in a cement grinder. My sheets stunk like a sewer drain. I regretted waking almost as much as I did the entire last twelve hours, but my phone was blaring reggae music and I had to make. It. Stop.

"Hello?" I croaked.

"Lex?" Cody's voice sounded tinny and far away. I glared at the picture of him on my phone. Guess his wasn't lost after all.

"You're an asshole." I threw one arm over my eyes to block the sunlight filtering through the frilly curtains. I hadn't thought it was possible, but my headache had actually gotten worse.

"You're okay?" Cody sounded genuinely relieved. Wonders never cease.

"No." I was tired, and sick, and hurt all over. And if it hadn't been for those three things, I would have been pissed as hell. Of course, to top it all off, I was grudgingly aware of a disturbing pattern of self-destruction emerging in my life of late. And most of it centered around my choice in boyfriends.

"Are you there?"

"Barely."

"Look." He paused long enough for me to wonder if I had dozed off with the phone against my ear. I jolted when he spoke again, which made my muscles cramp up. I hadn't been so stiff since my last soccer tournament. And I was pretty sure my brain was imploding.

"I didn't mean for things to go so far last night," Cody said. "I'm in trouble, Lex. I have to leave town. I don't know for how long, but I just...wanted to make sure you were okay, and say goodbye."

"I'll be fine." My eyes started watering over. That was it? Just goodbye. Not I'm sorry, or I'll miss you, or even, it's been fun? I should not have been surprised.

I heard him swallow. "Okay, well...I gotta go. Take care of yourself, Lex."

"Yeah. Sure. Whatever." I barely kept the tears out of my voice.

Don't cry. Do not cry!

But it didn't matter. He'd already hung up. As I lay there in my disgusting hangover nest of bedding, shivering, and hurting in every possible way, I had an epiphany. I realized the only bigger asshole in the world than Cody was me, for wanting him in the first place. I kicked off the covers in a surge of fury and threw my phone across the room with a strangled scream. The blood drained away from my head like liquid sludge, making me woozy, and I toppled back down.

"You're such an idiot." I sniffed. And I had another I-told-you-so coming when my mother found out about this. Hot tears beaded down my face.

"But that's enough, cry baby. Get up and move on now." I wiped my nose with the back of my hand and grunted as I stood. Sort of. The floor whirled around my feet, a kaleidoscope of discarded clothing. I slid down the hall, bumping the wall several times along the way.

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What kind of trouble could Cody be in, anyway? Hopefully the kind that would land him in jail with a cellmate named Bubba, who hated soap and liked pretty boys. It was vicious, but forgiveness had never been my strong suit. I felt like utter crap, and it was easier to blame Cody than to admit I had landed myself in this situation.

A year older, but no wiser. A night of near-death experiences, the hangover to end all hangovers, and not a single good memory to show for it.

There was a note from Theresa taped to the bathroom mirror: Told you. Be back Monday.

Nope, she couldn't resist. I tore it down and let it flutter to the floor, then leaned on the counter and blinked at my reflection. For once, I saw an exact interpretation of how I felt on the inside – sallow skin, smudged makeup, bloodshot eyes. I splashed some water on my face, but my looks didn't improve.

Next, I noticed the giant bruise-slash-hickey on my neck, accented by two rows of blood-filled teeth-marks. It looked like Cody had tried to bite a chunk out of me. That was going to leave a scar for the rest of my life. Should I get Rabies shots?

“Perfect,” I said, and then threw up in the sink.

I climbed into the shower, but couldn't stop shivering, even with the water on full hot. I couldn't stand or wash, so I crouched there and let the stream beat down on me until the water ran cold.

Something was off. This was more than just partying too hard.

What had been in that drink? I wondered as I fumbled for a towel, my teeth chattering. Maybe I was having an allergic reaction. Or maybe...Cody drugged me? As angry as I felt, I couldn't imagine Cody as the type of guy who would do that. But then again, I didn't think he was the type of guy who would bite a girl until she bled and abandon her to the care of a total stranger, either.

Shows what I know.

And why hadn't the bite hurt last night? Or bled? I cupped my hand over my neck. It still didn't hurt. Something was definitely wrong, I realized, as my muscles started to convulse and freeze-up. I staggered through my room like a darted lion, searching for my phone, knowing I only had seconds before I passed out again.

Seconds was too generous.

With my next step, the floor careened upward to slam into me.

You're not supposed to be able to dream when you're unconscious, but I did. I dreamt about the stranger from The Sweat Shop. He loomed over me, pressing his large, warm palm to my forehead and whispering something I couldn't quite hear, his lips moving slower than his voice. His voice. That thick, honeyed rumble...so alluring. I closed my eyes, listening to it rise and fall, before drifting into the black fog of dreamless sleep.

I woke up in my bed, blissfully relieved of stiffness or pain, but thirstier than I had ever been in my life. I leaned up on my elbows, and though I felt disoriented, everything in the room stayed where it should. Thank God for small

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mercies.

It was dark outside, and I wondered how long I had been out. I lifted the covers to see I had been dressed in a T-shirt and shorts, and my bed had been stripped underneath me. Theresa's comforter was draped over me, drenching me in the cloying scent of candied apples.

"Theresa?" My throat felt dry and scratchy. I looked around for something to drink.

"Miss Moore?"

Not Theresa.

The overhead light came on. I rubbed my eyes as they adjusted, then froze.

"Alexandra Moore?" My tall, dark stranger eyed me from the doorway, his arms crossed over his chest.

I let a few seconds pass by to make sure I wasn't still dreaming.

He didn't disappear.

I picked up the nearest solid object and pitched it at him as hard as I could. He ducked behind the doorway as my hairbrush hit the wall, but immediately poked his head back in.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I grabbed the lamp off the bedside table and brandished it like a deadly weapon. "Get out! Who do you think you are? I'm calling the cops!"

I threw off the covers and edged towards the windowsill, holding the lamp out in front of me. My breath came in unsteady gusts, but I was surprisingly calm, considering I had a psycho-maniac stalker in my bedroom.

He stared at me, his face a serene mask. "Which one of those questions do you want me to answer first?"

"Wh-What?" I swallowed hard, my throat constricting with the effort.

He held his hands out in front of him in a gesture of truce as he stepped into the room. His chocolate brown eyes never left mine.

"My name is Julian. I'm here to help you. I won't harm you. I helped you at the club last night, do you remember? An associate of mine brought you home. I took your keys. Your phone is broken, by the way."

"I don't understand." I shook my head. "What—" I paused and narrowed my eyes at his too-convincing expression of innocence. "No, wait, *why* are you here?"

"I told you, I'm here to help you." He eased farther into the room.

"So you're a doctor and you make house calls?"

He raised his eyebrows, his mouth twitching on one side. "Something like that."

He wasn't wearing the trench coat anymore, but even in just a turtleneck and jeans, he had an air of danger about him. That served as more of an attractant than a deterrent to my mixed-up radar, but something was definitely wrong with this picture. He'd stolen my keys and snuck in to my apartment to find me naked and drugged and he'd just dressed me and tucked me in?

I straightened up, projecting my mother's don't-you-dare-cross-me tone. "Look Mister, you don't have to give me some bullshit excuse. I don't care if

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you're the patron saint of hangovers – what you did is against the law. It's called breaking and entering, or, stealing and entering." My hand tightened around the lamp. "You need to get out of here. Now."

"I told you, my name is Julian." He sounded mildly agitated. "I'm not going to hurt you, Alex. Don't you want to know what happened to you last night?"

"Nope. Honestly, I'd rather forget the whole freaky thing." I tossed the lamp down and backed towards the window.

"You're not curious about the marks on your neck? Your bouts of unconsciousness?" He pressed forward.

I un-latched the window and inched it open, never taking my gaze from his. I shook my head slowly, trying to appear engaged in the conversation. "My loser boyfriend drugged me, bit me, and then left me there with you. Your buddy drove me home, and you got my name and address from my ID. You stole my keys and now you're here for what – thanks? What do you want?"

He was clearly nuts. I shuffled my feet, wedging my fingers into the small crack and gripping the edge of the metal window frame.

"He didn't drug you." He sighed, looking at me like someone who just wasn't getting it. Julian didn't strike me as the patient type, or the sort of person I wanted to piss off. He took a step closer and paused beside my dresser to look me up and down. "You seem like a tough girl, Alex, so I'm just going to tell you the truth: you're boyfriend is a– what you would call a vampire. He bit you. You died. And now you're becoming one too."

Yep, definitely nuts. With a side of Fruit Loops. Alarm bells sounded in my head. I whipped around, throwing the window open so fast, it slammed against the frame and flew off the track. I took a deep breath to scream my lungs out, but a large hand clamped over my mouth and nose. Julian wrapped his other arm around my waist and lifted me away from the window with graceful ease. I writhed and twisted as he held me with my feet off the ground, my back pressed to his chest. He didn't budge.

"I understand this is hard to believe." He spoke in low tones, right next to my ear. "But I'm telling you the truth. I'm not going to hurt you. You have my word."

And suffocating me was what, foreplay? I whimpered and tried kicking him with my heel, but just grazed his shins. He held on tight, unfazed by my attempts to bruise and scratch his legs and arms.

"Just relax," he said, "you'll see in a few minutes. What's the longest you've ever been able to hold your breath, Alex?" He shifted me so I had even less movement. His hand stayed suctioned over my face in an airtight seal.

My eyes watered over with the realization I was going to die. Murdered by a guy who I – of course – had the hots for.

The most mundane thoughts started to swirl in my mind, like how I wouldn't have to do my Micro paper after all. I should have told my mom I loved her more often. Should have listened to her, and this never would have happened. And now I would never get the chance to see Europe, or to find my biological

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father, or to take belly-dancing lessons. Tears streamed from my eyes.

But as I thought those things, minutes ticked by. I went on not breathing. A new and shocking reality seeped into my cluttered thoughts and flipped my world on its axis. Nothing hurt. I felt no pressure in my lungs, no pain, no blackout no...heartbeat. I stopped straining to get away and hung there in silence, searching for it. I couldn't feel or hear anything.

How could I be alive without oxygen? Six and a half minutes, if the heart kept beating, and then you were out. How could I not have a heartbeat and still be awake? Was I still stuck in a nightmare?

"I'm going to let you go now. Okay, Alex?" Julian whispered in my ear.

I'd almost forgotten about him. I stared around the room, wishing for everything to melt away into the world it was before. It didn't. I nodded.

"And we're going to talk about this calmly, no screaming, all right?" His voice had taken on a dulcet tone. Whether I liked it or not, it put me momentarily at ease. I nodded again, and he gradually loosened his hold.

I slid to the floor in a puddle of shattered sensibilities, sucking in breath after breath of air I apparently didn't need. And I cried. I brought my hand up and pressed two fingers to my carotid artery as Julian hovered over me like the Grim Reaper. Nothing. I tried my wrist, pressed my hand to my chest: stillness.

"That's not possible!" I sobbed, pounding on my breastplate. *This can't be real. I can't be...dead.* I wrapped my arms around my knees, hiding my face.

Wake up, Alex. Wake up.

A hand on my shoulder jerked me out of my internal chanting. Julian knelt beside me, his look intent, lips pressed tight. I wiped back my tears, studying him as he settled on the floor.

"Who the hell are you?" *What's happening to me? Am I crazy? Dreaming? Dead? I can't really be dead...*

He studied my face. "I'm an Undead, like you."

I can't be Undead either. I had my whole life ahead of me – graduation, travel, med school, a career, a family of my own – I just had no pulse. How was I supposed to explain that one to my mother, the heart surgeon? This was not something I could change, no matter how hard she pushed me. How was I going to make the team at Stanford if I couldn't pass a physical? I shook my head. "This is impossible."

"Your idea of what is possible is going to have to change," Julian said. "We are what the myths and legends of vampires are based on. Less than alive, more than dead. This is real."

I inwardly cringed at his words, but his voice seemed like the only normal, friendly thing in a world where nothing I had ever counted on or believed in was for sure.

"I don't understand. I've known Cody for six months – he's not a vampire. We've sunbathed naked together!"

"Your boyfriend is newly made, barely a week ago. And the sun doesn't kill us right away, it merely weakens us."

I chewed the inside of my lip, sizing him up. He looked completely

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serious. “For argument’s sake, let’s say I believe you. How do you fit in to all of this?”

“I’m...an enforcer.” He shifted as if he couldn’t get comfortable. He looked odd – all brooding darkness and powerful muscles hunched against my Hawaiian print hamper. He sighed and fixed me with a blank look.

Not a conversationalist, I guess. And him the only person who could tell me what the hell was going on. *Figures*. I had to get a grip on things quick, or I was going to check myself into the loony bin. “Okay, you’re an enforcer, and you’re here because Cody is in trouble?”

“No.” His voice was suddenly more gruff. “You’re why your boyfriend is in trouble. He got carried away with you. An Undead as new as he is shouldn’t have had enough venom to turn someone completely. When they do, their victims usually go manic. You were surprisingly lucid afterwards. I thought you might survive, otherwise I wouldn’t have left you. You haven’t gone through your final transformation yet, but you appear sane.”

“Ex-boyfriend,” I corrected, raking my hands through my hair. “And I’m not so sure about the sane part.”

Of course, next to a man who broke into women’s apartments claiming to be an Undead enforcer, the sanity bar was low enough that I could probably hobble over it. How was I going to tell anyone what had happened to me? Mom would have me on an operating table in ten minutes flat. I shuddered at the thought. I could never tell her.

Julian unfolded from the floor and held out a hand to help me up, which I accepted. His skin was warm, just like before. I realized how cold I was. Shock? Or just having no bloodflow? I stood, silently pondering, until he cleared his throat and drew his hand away from where I’d been holding it in both of mine.

I studied his shielded gaze, wide mouth, and the scar on his cheek with a new importance. Julian was now the only person I knew in this nightmare come to life, the only person who knew me, besides dick-face Cody. Maybe he read my mind, because his features softened, and his shoulders relaxed.

“The Code is strict on someone as new as your ex-boyfriend making another Undead. He doesn’t have any rank and he didn’t have a license. If he was smart, he went to his Sponsor, who will probably take him before the Cloak for judgment. If he was stupid, he’s running, and someone like me will have to hunt him down.”

“Rank?” *Code? Sponsor? The Cloak?* I slumped onto the foot of my bed and rubbed my temples to keep my impending headache at bay. It was a lot to take in: not just my missing heartbeat, but an Undead enforcer in my bedroom explaining the rules of some underground vampire society. Julian started to answer my question, but I held up a hand to stop him. I didn’t have the energy to even attempt to comprehend his explanation.

“Let’s start over. Is there any way out of this?” My voice betrayed more hope than I liked. But I thought I was handling it pretty well, considering I was technically *dead*, and yet having thoughts and conversations.

A shadow passed over his face as he looked down at me, and I saw the

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answer in his eyes before he shook his head. “There’s no going back.”

“Right. Okay. So dead is still dead. Or...Undead, I guess.” I spoke half to myself, burying my face in my hands. I had to think, but my temples throbbed and my jaw ached.

I heard the shuffling of his clothes as Julian left the room. When he returned, he gathered my lamp from the floor. He plugged it in and turned it on, then shut off the bright overhead. “Better?”

“Thanks.” I turned my head to watch him from the corner of my eye as he sat down on the bed beside me. He unscrewed the cap of an aluminum thermos.

I licked my lips, remembering how desperately thirsty I was. The thirst surged again, now that my mental shock was wearing off. Julian took a drink and then raised one eyebrow, slanting the thermos in my direction. A metallic tang hit my palette. My mouth watered to the point that I almost drooled.

I tilted the jug to my lips and swallowed a large gulp, which I promptly choked on. “Blegh! What is that? It’s awful.”

I took another long swig. It tasted like rotten strawberries, yet was oddly satisfying.

“Tomato juice and cow’s blood.”

I spit the third mouthful out in a red mist.

He pursed his lips to keep from smiling. “Sort of a newbie cocktail.”

I eyed the thermos, fighting my urge to take another drink. In theory, it was sickening, but my body craved more. I took another small sip, trying to taste the blood, expecting to gag. I didn’t. I sighed and resigned myself to drinking the rest in two long swigs.

“What am I supposed to do now?”

“Well.” Julian sounded relieved I’d asked. “Tonight you’ll go through your final transformation. It’s very unpleasant, so I’ll give you something to knock you out. I’ll leave you the number of someone who deals with cases like yours – ones without Sponsors.”

He paused, concern marring his features. I realized I was scowling at him and swept the look off of my face before handing him back the empty thermos.

“Sorry.” I wiped my mouth. “I meant on a grander scale. You know, with the life I thought I had. But I guess that’s not your department.” I fell back onto the bed, and stared up at the ceiling.

“Not usually.” The comforting tone seeped back into his voice. I closed my eyes, letting it soothe my raw nerves. “Normally, when I show up, you’re in deep shit.”

“True-dat.”

Julian laughed. The rich timbre of it made me smile, despite my grim mood. “I think you’re going to be okay, Alex.”

“Because I’m tough?” I sat up, shoulder to shoulder with him.

“Among other things.” He looked down at his lap, his brows knit together. “I’ve seen a lot of newbie turns go very badly. That’s why I came here tonight, in case you needed to be restrained and taken in, or...put down.” He sighed so deeply I felt it down to my toes. “I’m glad that didn’t happen.”

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He glanced over at me and our gazes locked. I was glad too. Glad that he hadn't been forced to kill me. Glad that he was here now. I'm not sure why I felt like I could, but I reached over and pressed my fingers to his neck. He startled at the touch, but then swallowed and relaxed.

"Just checking." I felt for a pulse. There wasn't one. His skin was considerably warmer than mine, smooth, and I could still smell that faint leathery scent. I pulled down the collar of his shirt, searching for a bite mark, but didn't find one of those either.

"We heal exceptionally well."

I pressed my hand over the mangled flesh on my own neck.

Julian brushed my chin with his fingertips, turning my head slightly. He eased my hand away. "That one might leave a scar. He was sloppy."

His thumb slid across the ring of swollen bumps, and I couldn't repress the shiver his touch brought. The warmth in his fingertips painted a trail of heat on my skin, relaxing the muscles beneath.

"What's going to happen to Cody?" I asked to fill the heavy silence.

He let go of me and cleared his throat, his mouth drawing down at the corners. "He and his Sponsor will both be punished by the Cloak, but if they cooperate, it shouldn't be too severe."

It seemed like he had flipped an internal switch. Another side of him emerged when he mentioned the Cloak, a harder side I didn't like so much. My eyes lingered over the shiny crescent-shaped scar on his otherwise perfect profile. I had to wonder: if he healed exceptionally well, what had left that mark? Had it been there before he'd turned into an Undead?

He caught me studying him and stood. "I should go."

"No, wait." I grabbed his hand.

The mixture of impatience and curiosity in his expression was growing familiar, as if he couldn't quite figure me out and hadn't decided if he liked that or not. The idea of intriguing Julian managed to thrill me just a little, despite the general downward spiral of my life, and even my recent death.

"Please." I let my very real desperation come through in my voice.

Think, Alex – don't let him go.

All that echoed in my mind was the increasingly uncomfortable truth: I didn't want to be alone. No one else could possibly comprehend what had happened to me. I stared into Julian's dark eyes, and swallowed the lump in my throat. "I have so many questions."

I need help figuring this out.

"I know," he said, all gentle reassurance, "and you'll get answers."

He reached into his pocket and handed me a business card, which I examined with feigned interest: ten hand-written digits. I would have staked my life *—ha!*—on it not being Julian's number.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry." A self-conscious frown distorted his handsome face. He tucked a small vial into my palm. "Here."

I furrowed my brows and examined the viscous black liquid.

"Drink it." He closed my fingers for me. "You should sleep through most

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of tonight and tomorrow. When you wake up, call the number. The Cloak will assign you a case worker to help you sort things out. Don't make a move without calling them first. You'll need more blood, and they can provide it for you. No one can find out about what you are, Alex. If you reveal anything about the Undead or the Cloak, they won't hesitate to eliminate you. Consider yourself warned."

He picked up his coat from atop a pile of folded laundry by the door and shrugged it on.

"Julian?"

He paused in the doorway and glanced back at me, his black hair falling to shadow his eyes.

"Will I ever see you again?"

"Not if you play your cards right. Watch out for yourself, Alex." He gave me a half-smile, and then he walked out without looking back.

Guys doing that to me was really starting to get old.

I sat on the edge of my bed for I don't know how long, teetering at the edge of the unknown.

How can any of this be real?

I examined the vial in my hand and thought about how my main gripe had always been my life's predictability. My course had been plotted ahead of me since before I was born. Even my conception had been considered, planned, and executed by my mother like an operation. I had always felt trapped by it, had searched for a way to break the mold. But now the boring, predictable life I'd wanted to escape had been snatched away, and I faced a great big question mark. I realized how much I had taken for granted.

Still, another part buried deep inside of me stirred, an inner restlessness. That part looked at the blank slate ahead and felt *relieved*. I had no idea what could or would happen to me, and yet I wasn't afraid. That alone should have scared the hell out of me – but I'd always felt something was missing, that there had to be *more*. I'd thought it had been growing up with half of my parentage a complete mystery, but maybe what I'd sensed was that the reality I'd grown up in was simply...wrong on several counts. Like the line between life and death.

Since I was dead already, what did I have to lose?

I uncapped the vial, tilted it to my lips, and swallowed it down.

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Chapter Three

I dreamed. This time nothing soothed away the pain or the horror. I was alone. Exposed. Falling into an endless abyss that was both cradling me and tearing at me like a raging funnel of wind. Black shadows swirled, peeling scraps of me off to become ash and join with the shadows. Powerful gusts wracked me from every side.

Suspended in freefall, I couldn't hear my own screams over the howling wind. My physical body didn't hurt, but whatever lived inside of it – my soul, my spirit – writhed in agony. Each piece that was stripped away left me raw and aching.

There was no sense of time. An eternity passed before I slammed into the bottom. I splattered into a formless puddle of sentient ooze. Drops of me clung together and gathered into runnels, trying to take shape. But they couldn't fit like they had before. Parts of me were missing. And yet, I could draw from the primordial grit below me, from the haze hanging all around.

The elements in this strange state of consciousness whispered to me, offering themselves.

Join with us. You are a part of us.

Slowly, I re-built myself, guided by the voices, until I found the new me – Alex – lying there on the dry, scratchy ground. The darkness was so absolute, I couldn't tell if I still had eyes.

As I rose to my feet, the voices took on unique tones, murmuring in a nonsensical rabble. A faint white light glowed overhead. Relief bubbled up inside me. I didn't like the penetrating shadows. If I surrendered, would they swallow me whole?

The voices grew more insistent, rising to a confusing crescendo. I covered my ears, but it made no difference. They came from inside my head as much as outside.

The light grew steadily closer, and I surged with hope for a reprieve from the oppressive whispers. Their words felt like icy fingers probing inside my head, worming through me as if I were still made of that molten substance.

A puddle of light reached me and ebbed slowly outward, brightening the landscape. Which just brought into relief that I was surrounded.

The voices enveloped me, coiling through my insides, sucking at the form I had created for myself with more desperation. The shadows kept whispering, caressing me, trying to make me a part of the darkness, one piece at a time. I fought and drew away, imagining that I could slice through them with my thoughts, but like a hydra, for every one I stopped, two more reached out.

“Leave me alone!” I shouted to hear my own voice over the whispers.

The shadows reared back.

I ran, with no direction. There wasn't really ground underneath me, or air in my lungs, but I ran in what felt like deep sand – as hard as I could.

Behind me, the darkness built into a towering wave. The voices became a collective force, shaking the ground, even the air. They crested overhead as the

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sand receded under my strides.

“No!” I screamed as the wave curled over me, shutting out the light.

I woke up screaming and dripping with sweat. The room was tilting from side to side. The voices had stopped, but a low rumble and frantic rattling engulfed me. The ground actually *was* shaking. It wasn't just the remnants of my dream.

The walls vibrated. Pictures slid to the floor. The lamp toppled over and broke, plunging the room into darkness, as if the shadows had tried to follow me back into the real world.

I leapt from my bed, surprisingly quick and agile, as if gravity had less hold on me. I braced myself in the doorway while the building continued to shimmy, the forty year-old joists creaking in protest.

The inside wall of my room cracked from floor to ceiling. Screams echoed from the surrounding dorms. I tried to calm my breathing, to reassure myself that it wasn't real. I was here.

My name is Alex Moore. I'm twenty-one. I go to Pacific University. I play forward on the soccer team. I just got accepted to Stanford. Oh yeah...my ex-boyfriend killed me two nights ago.

A buzz ran along the hall, electrical outlets exploding in its wake, filling the air with a smell of ozone and dusty plaster.

“It's just an earthquake,” I said to myself, “they happen all the time.” I was thankful for the feeling of my tense muscles, my feet underneath me, clothes clinging to my sweat-slicked skin. *I'm here.* The darkness that wanted to swallow me up wasn't real. I was too overjoyed that my soul and body were still connected to be scared of a little natural disaster.

The earthquake stopped.

I released my death-grip on the doorframe and sank to the floor, grateful for the dirty, flattened carpet under my fingers. I lay there, not breathing for a long moment of eerie stillness. I counted to a hundred very slowly, and still didn't need to breathe.

Not all a dream, then.

The fire alarm blared through the calm, and the sprinklers came on. A pounding of feet hit the hallways, along with the murmur of a whole dormitory of people stirred from sleep into hysterics in a matter of minutes.

“Alex! Theresa! Come on!” Someone banged on my outer door.

I got up slowly, relishing the spray of water raining down, each cool drop a tingle of awareness on my now heated skin.

Outside, the corridor was a chaos of people shoving and stumbling in a pack of drenched bodies as alarms blared and emergency lights flashed. To me, they seemed to be moving in slow motion. Every detail was stretched out. Watching them felt like observing an ant farm – an invisible plate of glass and a world of understanding between us. They were so oblivious. Like I had been forty-eight hours ago.

Nothing could have made it clearer that I was different now. I felt it in

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every cell of my body. For one thing, I felt strong. Fit. I could probably do an Ironman without batting an eyelash. But I could also taste their fear in the air – a jolt of saltiness, like touching your tongue to a battery. I could smell each of them, from the pungent hungover stoners to the sweet innocent freshmen. I took them all in at once, but my brain catalogued every unique signature. A new part of my mind had opened up to discern and process this information. It was such an incredible high, I'll admit I temporarily lost myself in the power trip.

When fire truck sirens joined the fray outside, I made my way down the stairs and through the front door. The bulk of the students had gathered across the street on the lawn in front of the health building. I turned the opposite way, slipping into a narrow alley between our hall and the next.

The murmur of the crowd filtered out of my hearing, and the alarm bells finally stopped. I walked down the alley feeling as though I was made of silk and shadow, invisible and walking on air – a part of the night. Moonlight caressed my skin in a soft, milky beam. It was the most incredible feeling I'd ever had in my life. I smiled at that thought – *not my life, my death*.

I was an Undead. It had to be true – and it felt incredible! Like I had finally, truly awakened. Even the mice scurrying along the side of the brick building held a new wonder for me. I had no trouble seeing the fine details of the alley through the dark. I knew I didn't have to breathe to live, but every lungful of air brought a cacophony of new information about the world around me. My appearance hadn't changed, that I could tell, but I was more tuned-in to every part of my body, in precise control of each movement and aware of every molecule of my being.

I wonder if I can leap off tall buildings like Kate Beckinsale.

Still lost in the wonders of new world, I didn't realize I wasn't alone until it was too late. I hadn't heard a footstep or even a rustle of clothing, but I felt when the air shifted behind me. I whirled on my heel and threw my hands out, bracing for a body check that never came.

Instead, I saw Julian's surprised face for the blink of an eye before he flew backwards, as if yanked from behind by an invisible rope. He crashed into a fire escape with a loud clang and a grunt, and then fell ten feet to the cement with a wet slap.

As he lifted himself to his knees, I ran to him.

"What are you doing here?" I grabbed an arm and helped him lean against the wall. "Am I in trouble already? I just woke up!"

He jerked out of my grasp and scowled at me.

I eased away, hurt by the look of accusation on his face. But the rest of me, the newly blossoming Undead, felt a jolt of excitement at the sight of him. And the smell, which was even more enticing now, if that was possible. Even the innate *sense* of him had me buzzing. He was kindred, like me. I knew instinctually.

But what was really fascinating was the halo of soft golden energy that surrounded him. It melted on my skin like butter and invaded my palate with an infusion of vanilla and caramel. My mouth watered. Deeper parts of me pulsed

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with warmth.

The look on his face slowly changed from anger to confusion to...astonishment?

“You’re so beautiful.” I couldn’t help smiling. “Why didn’t you tell me it would be like this?”

“I—” He stared at me for another second, then stood. His expression locked down into an unreadable mask. “I didn’t know.”

I cocked my head, wondering what he meant, and reached out to take his hand.

Julian grabbed the front of my shirt and swung me against the wall with a knife pinned at my throat. I looked into his deep brown eyes, now hard and cold. My jaw hung slack in surprise.

“Why didn’t you tell me you’re one of them?” he snarled. His face, suddenly fierce, was inches away from mine.

“One of who?” I swallowed hard, my throat constricting with panic, acutely aware of the blade grazing my skin. There was nothing of the guy from my dorm room looking back at me. He was the definition of Stone Cold Killer.

“A Grigoric Agent!” he yelled in my face, pulling me from the wall just to slam me into it again, harder. My head cracked against the bricks, and I bit my tongue. I whimpered, and tears welled in my eyes without my permission.

“Is this some sort of trap?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” I yelled back, enraged by his betrayal of my trust. Even admitting to myself that I had trusted him seemed so stupid. *Exactly what got you killed in the first place!* “Why are you doing this to me?”

I closed my eyes to the ugly hatred twisting the face I’d already grown to like. I wanted to sink away from the sharp, flinty cloud his energy had shifted to. What I could only describe as tangible rage poured off of him in waves.

My chest constricted with regret. I really was all alone.

Julian studied my face, his eyes tracking the single tear that managed to escape. Slowly, he relaxed and lowered the blade from my throat. I wiped my cheek and sank down the bricks until I folded in on myself. I shivered in my soaked pajamas as the November air bit at my skin.

“You really don’t know?” He sounded just as confused as I felt.

“No!” I didn’t know anything anymore. I didn’t know who I was, what I was, or why he was so angry.

Julian pushed off from the wall, cursed and spun around, his black coat twirling in his wake. He took two steps, and repeated the motion, pacing in front of me, muttering to himself.

All my joy of discovery faded as confusion and exhaustion settled in. I’d been used, and then thrown away. Abandoned into a world where nothing made sense, or worked like it should. No safe place. No one to turn to. If only I could disappear, or just wake up. Even the one person I wanted to count on to guide me was unreliable. *Serves you right.*

“I don’t understand how this could happen.” Julian had finally stopped

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pacing. He stood a few feet away, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“I don’t understand any of this at all!” I raked my fingers through my wet hair. “You’re the one who’s supposed to be some sort of know-it-all enforcer!”

“I know!” He whipped around and slapped his fists against the opposite wall, then leaned against it, his head sagging between his shoulders.

“I didn’t ask for this.” I sniffed.

“I know,” Julian repeated, calmer. He straightened up and faced me, apparently decided on something. He squatted to my level.

I pulled myself into a tighter ball and leaned away.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” He was back to being friendly and reasonable. His mood swings were going to give me whiplash.

“You said that before.”

“And I meant it.” He held out his hand. I looked from his offered hand to his face, which I couldn’t read. But the light around him had settled to a faint golden halo, with the occasional flare of smoky grey. I had no idea why I believed him, or if it was the right thing to do, but I knew I would rather trust Julian than not. I would rather have one friend than no one at all. I didn’t have much choice. No one else would ever believe me. No one else could tell me what was going on. I took his hand.

“We have to get you out of here.” He shucked his coat and placed it over my shoulders, then wrapped an arm around me and scanned the darkened alley in both directions.

“Why?” I stumbled, but Julian righted me and nudged me along.

“Because the Grigori will be looking for you now, but they kill Undead on sight.”

“Oh.”

Right – of course. Silly me.