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R

Mature Readers

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Chapter 1.

When I look into Kisa's beautiful green eyes, I want to puke until I die.

End of chapter one.

I know. That's a pretty short chapter. But, you know, that's how long it is. Well, was, until I explained it.

Chapter 2.

It started with a shooting star.

I sat on the back of my pick-up truck sipping a beer. A cool breeze blew off the ocean, salty and smelling faintly of seaweed, and the leaves had started to turn: half bright yellows and tans, the rest still green. It was like nature had really bad acne.

Cassie sat next to me, her head on my shoulder, one hand on my leg. She smelled like vanilla, and she wore a pair of old, faded jeans, and a blue Highlands High School sweatshirt that matched mine.

I know. Matching outfits. A pukeable offense, but she was my girlfriend, and she seemed really into me, and I felt bad all the time because I kind of really wasn't that into her. So, I did stuff like wear matching shirts to make up for my secret lack of passion.

Her: Smiles and cuddles and I love spending time together.

Me: Why don't I feel anything? Why can't I manage to give a shit? And lots of I love yous

So, there on the back of my pick-up truck, and Cassie was talking about something, telling me something that happened at school that day, and I couldn't pay attention, couldn't concentrate, and just sipped my beer, feeling worse and worse as her words poured into the black hole of my soul, and I thought very clearly: I wish I wasn't like this.

And just at that moment, a shooting star arced across the sky, right above the flickering New York skyline. My skin kind of tingled...

"Hey," I said, nudging Cassie. "Did you see that?"

"See what?" she said, squeezing my arm.

"That shooting star?"

She sat up, excited. "What? Where?"

"It's gone. It was right over New York."

"Damn! I missed it. Did you make a wish?"

"No," I lied, or half lied. I'd been wishing when the star appeared, so I felt like it sort of didn't count anyway.

"Why not?" she said. "I hate you! I've been wanting to wish on a star my whole life!"

"Really?" I said. "Why? You know wishes don't come true."

She frowned, then shrugged. "Because it's fun, and anyway I just did. I even know what I would wish for."

"There's a big meteor shower every summer," I answered. "You could go out and make a hundred wishes."

"Dylan, that doesn't count. It has to be random, like magic."

"If you say so." I knew better than to argue with girl logic.

Cassie just squeezed my arm and said, "If you see another one, tell me!"

"By the time I--"

But I stopped as I heard thrashing guitars and pounding drums, some sneering singer with a British accent yelling, "Everything sucks! Everything sucks! Live ya life before ya lose ya guts!" A beat up black van pulled around the corner, smoke billowing from the tailpipe, and it screeched to a halt on the curb.

"Who's that?" Cassie said, looking back at the van.

I was about to say "some losers," but then the door slid open with a metallic clang, and out stepped the most--I don't even know a word for it--the most everything girl I had ever seen. Yeah, I did notice those eyes right away--so big and green and full of mischief, and I'm a guy, I definitely appreciated her shape, but it was something much more than that, like something out of some dumb movie, because the moment I saw her I felt an electric charge shoot through my body, and she looked right at me, and we both kind of pulled back, staring, and I felt this powerful sense of connection, like I'd never felt before, but then she kind of smiled, like she had some big secret, and turned away from me.

I have to admit, and it makes zero sense, but that broken contact actually--it hurt.

Right behind her, two guys jumped out of the van, and I hated them immediately. Tall but scrawny, one had orange hair and one white, and they wore ragged black clothes. They obviously thought they were cool. Plus, they came with this amazing girl, which was reason enough to hate them. The three of them moved confidently among the kids, talking loud, fist bumping.

"Do you know who they are?" Cassie repeated.

"Probably just some kids from Raritan." I watched the new girl, taking in the almost arrogant way she walked, the way she tossed her long, red hair, the way when she stopped walking she stood with her hip thrust to one side when she talked.

"Don't stare," Cassie said, and for maybe only the second time in our relationship she sounded angry. The first time was when I said the guy in the *The Notebook* should have just gone home already.

"I'm not staring," I said, feeling guilty because I was so staring, and while my girlfriend was leaning on me.

"She looks like a slut," Cassie said.

"Yeah," I answered, taking that as permission to take another glance. I noticed she had some kind of tattoo on her shoulder. I brought my attention back to Cassie. "Sluts are bad. I hate them."

"Shut up," she said, pulling me in for a kiss. "Let's get out of here. Go someplace more private?" She smiled her I want to make out smile. She looked really cute when she smiled like that, really pretty, and I ached at the sight of it, because she deserved a guy who really loved her, and she was going to find out one day that I didn't.

"Yeah," I said, "let's go." I helped her down from the back of the truck, walked her around to the passenger side and opened the door for her. I decided to take one more look at the mystery girl while Cassie had her back to me. Mystery girl had her back to me, talking excitedly to Kelly O'Brien, waving her arms, and I thought this girl works out, but just then she turned, as if she sensed my eyes on her, and our eyes met again. Hers now blazed with fury, and she bared her teeth at me before spinning away and vanishing into the crowd.

What the hell? So, I was checking her out? Since when did that become a crime?

Cassie and I drove down to Seabright and parked in the municipal lot across from the ocean. We kissed and cuddled, looking out at the dark expanse, the waves crashing on the white sand, all lit in pale, cold

moonlight from the half moon. She took off her sweatshirt, and I squeezed her breast while we kissed.

I felt dead inside, like that kid in *The Last Picture Show*. Kissing a girl, getting to touch her boobs, that was supposed to be pretty much the best thing in the world, but I felt bored, disinterested. I faked it. I didn't want to hurt Cassie's feelings, but the whole time I kept thinking about the girl with the green eyes, and wondering about that tattoo, and if she had any others in hidden, secret places.

I'm a turd. I know.

Chapter 3.

When I got home that night I stripped off my sweatshirt and tossed it on the floor, threw myself onto my bed and got on my phone. I searched around on social media, figuring that Red might be a kid from Raritan, and then I looked at Kelly's Instagram, since the new girl had been talking to her, but again I couldn't find any trace of her. I put my phone down, rolled onto my stomach and buried my face in my pillow.

What's the big deal? I thought to myself. She's just some kid.

But as I drifted off to sleep, all I could think about were those green eyes, and her smile, and then I dreamt I was watching her running a brush through that long, thick red hair, pulling it through a tangle, and my scalp ached with the pain of it, and I suddenly felt like I was not imagining her, but that I was her, and then I heard her shout "Get Out!".

I woke up feeling cranky, annoyed about nothing. My sister was just coming back from a run. She's pretty athletic for a girl, plays basketball softball and soccer, all at girl level. I've always been able to beat her at everything, which enrages her because she knows she works harder than me and my only edge really is testosterone. I slump at the table and pour a bowl of Grape Nuts, dump a spoonful of protein powder and then drown it all in milk. Hester, my parents loved old fashioned names, makes some kind of smoothie and gulps it down. She's got her headphones on, her head bobbing to some kind of dumb pop music while she taps out texts.

My mother comes down in her nurse's uniform, says something. I grunt between shoveling more cereal into my mouth. My dad passes through at some point. I get in my truck and head to school. My phone vibrates. No doubt some text from Cassie full of emojis. They might as well be hieroglyphics. I have no idea what all these winking suns are supposed to mean.

She's too bright and too happy. I just wish sometimes she would be bitchy, or check out some dude, or do something shitty. I don't know if that makes sense.

I drift through the day, staring off into space, zoned out. I see people in the hall and put on the act--fist bumps, smiles, bro hugs. Ask me ten minutes later who I just talked to, and I couldn't tell you. My high-school life is just one poorly lit, cinderblock hall after another. Different clubs have tried to plaster over the dreary, industrial colors with desperately cheerful signs and banners, hand painted in bright colors, but it's all like the smiles they put on the faces of dead people when you go for a viewing. You know underneath the surface is just a cold, rotting corpse.

And then I walk into the weight room, and I see her standing there doing curls, and my eyes meet hers, and I feel that electricity again. She looks

away. I walk over to the rack and grab some dumbbells. Thinking twice and wanting to impress her, I go up five pounds more than I usually start with, then I walk around and stand right in front of her, curling. "What's your name?" I ask.

"Hey, I don't want to be rude," she says. "But I'm not interested."

Now, I don't want to sound like that guy, but I could see the lie in her face: her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes flickered down and away, but when they came back there was something there, and I felt a pull between us, sparks, energy. I could feel it. She was into me. So, I stayed the course.

"You just coming off a relationship or something?"

She made an exasperated sound and just walked away, still doing curls.

I stood there, confused. I mean, I know we're supposed to be cool and confident and all that, and I am pretty much - to the point of being bored with everyone - but I really liked this girl, more than I had ever liked anyone, and I knew she liked me, so I just figured she was testing me, wanting me to chase her.

I watched her, looking at the small of her back, where she had another tattoo, a strange pattern I had never seen before: it looked like an Escher drawing, interlocking lines that just fed into each other in a constant loop. Probably some yoga bullshit, but it fascinated me. She seemed so exotic, so different from the local girls. I started to go after her again, but then someone kind of bumped me. "Bro!"

Kyle Graveson. The starting quarterback. The guy who'd beaten me out for the job. "Gotta keep those arms ripped for carrying that clipboard, am I right?" he said.

"Whatever I can do to help the team," I said. Kyle was only an inch taller than me, but otherwise more--more muscle, more quickness, more teeth. He even had better skin--at least according to my sister. He worked out like his future depended on it, and it kind of did because National Recruiting had ranked him among the top twenty quarterback prospects in the country.

"Checking out the new girl," he said. "She is a little cutie."

"She's all right." My biceps had started to burn, but I kept curling.

"Spoken like a man who just got shot down."

"As if."

Kyle smirked and ran a hand through his spikey blonde hair. "Watch and learn."

He walked up to red, putting a hand on the small of her back, right on top of that amazing tattoo, leaned in and said something, and she giggled and did a cute little shrug, and I put my weights down and walked away, feeling like a loser.

At lunch, I sat with Cassie and our crew, a mix of cheerleaders and jocks. I tried my best to focus on her, but the new girl had come in and sat with Kyle, and she was laughing at all his jokes, tossing her hair, and I felt sick watching them together.

"Earth to Dylan. Earth to Dylan."

I looked at Cassie, smiled.

"Where are you these past couple days?"

"Just thinking about stuff."

"Could you maybe think a little about me?"

"I do think about you," I said, thinking, about how to break up with you.

"What?" she said, tilting her head to the side.

"What?"

"What was that look?" she said, popping a cherry tomato into her mouth.

The other kids had fallen quiet. They watched us.

"I didn't make a look."

"Okay," she said, . "Okay."

I checked out the ceiling, thought about sticking with my denial, but then went for the save. "You look great."

She stared at me for an awkward couple of seconds, then let that smile spread on her face, her eyes brightening. "Thanks."

The bell rang. I grabbed Cassie's tray. "Let me get that for you."

She looked--relieved. "Walk me to class?"

"Of course."

My friend Jack and I carried trays over to the kitchen. "Nice save," he said.

"Man, I felt like I was about one more bad comment away from having to spend an afternoon watching Riverdale with her."

"I like that show."

"You would."

I slid the trays into the stainless-steel slot, turned and damn if I didn't catch Red staring at me, staring at me with crazy eyes. I met her eyes, smirked, and then forced myself to look away, walking off to join Cassie, slipping my

arm around her, pulling her to me, kissing her on the head, then glancing back over my shoulder to see her staring, now joined by the two creepy guys from the van, the three of them looking at me, staring at me, almost like they were studying me, and they were whispering together as they stared.

--

Cassie had been rambling on about Halloween. It was over a month away, but evidently from what I gathered by half listening to her chatter, we needed to have amazing costumes that would be everything. She kept throwing out and rejecting her own ideas--Batman and Catwoman, Iron Man and Pepper Potts, characters from the Kingsmen, or the paranormal explorers from The Conjuring

"You should be a slutty cheerleader," I said. "Oh, wait, you already are."

"Haha," she said, playfully punching me. "Come on, though, seriously. It's really important to me we have the best costumes this year."

"Yes," I said, digging deep to find the energy. "Awesome and everything! We have to win at costumes!"

"Are you teasing me?"

"No. Hell no. I am into this. Totally into this costume war."

I could see how happy it made her to see me excited, getting behind her idea. I guessed I would have to stay with her at least until Halloween now. It would be pretty dickish to break up with her before then, now I'd agreed

to the whole thing and all. Of course, that would put me close to Thanksgiving, Christmas, which breaking up before also seemed dickish.

But I had to do it. For her, and for me.

Just not yet. I would keep faking it because I didn't want to be a dick.

Chapter 4

Friday night. Trumpets blasting, drums beating. The smell of charred meat mixing with the sweet, tart smell of fertilizer. The cheerleaders chanting on the sidelines. "Rah, rah ree, kick em in the knee. Rah, Rah, rass, kick 'em in the other knee!" By the third quarter, we led 24-3 when Kyle lofted a pass that rose into the air, a perfect, tight spiral arcing across the lights and dropping as soft as a baby's butt 52 yards later into the arms of Akachi Abraham, our star receiver, who'd beaten press coverage and gotten ten yards behind the defense. He spiked the ball, did a bow, then jumped into the arms of his team mates. The players for Neptune walked off the field, heads hanging. I pumped my fist, shouting, "Yeah! Yeah!"

But then coach came over and totally ruined the mood by slapping me on the shoulder pad and saying-- "Warm up. You're going in."

"Into the game?"

"Where the hell do you think?"

Shit. I had never gotten into a game with so much time left. Not a whole quarter. I usually just went in for a last possession. The whole offense for me consisted of four plays: hand off, hand off, kneel, go home.

I ran over and got the backup center off the bench, where he'd been yucking it up with some of the other guys. We tossed the ball back and forth, and then I had him snap the ball to me. My biggest fear was that I would pull a butt fumble like Mark Sanchez and become the laughing stock of high-school football on the Jersey Shore.

Neptune went three and out. Punted. They managed to down the ball on our four-yard line, which was a very difficult place for us to start, and I looked at coach thinking he might reconsider and put Kyle back in, but he just waved me toward the field and said, "It's on you."

I glanced over at Cassie, and I saw her eyes get wide as she saw me running onto the field. I could see how proud she was, and I also thought about the scouts who were in the stands to see Kyle, Akachi and a few others. Maybe I would get their attention? Make a name for myself? Be something more than bored?

I saw myself wearing the maize and blue, running onto the field at Michigan Stadium, the 100,000 fans howling, but then I found myself in the huddle, ten guys looking at me, and I settled down, focused my mind on right now, this moment, and I barked out the play, and we broke huddle and I ran to the line, looking over the defense.

I could see the malicious glee in their glassy eyes. Here comes the new guy. The backup. We are going to eat him alive.

We ran right up the middle twice, right behind the right guard, and Washington managed to power his way to a total of seven yards. Third and three. We're on the 11-yard line. Neptune hasn't done anything all night on offense. The safe thing to do is run again, punt, let them try and make something happen on offense, which they won't.

Coach signals in the play. Another run up the middle, just as I expected. Just as everyone expects. I curse, but it's the smart call, the right call, and I am just the back-up, and--

I see her leaning on the fence. Red. She's wearing a leather jacket and has a purple bandana tied in her hair. Shit. I call the play, we break huddle and jog to the line of scrimmage. Neptune's defensive linemen stack in tight to stop the run, and the linebackers creep up, eyes burning with intensity, the blackout underneath smeared and running down their cheeks from all the sweat. They'd had a long day, gotten beaten up pretty bad, and they are determined to get a stop here, to show their toughness, to maintain their pride.

I glance at Red out of the corner of my eye, and I see Akachi lined up wide. The defensive back he's been beating all night is lined up right across from him, expecting a run, focused on shedding a block, making a tackle, and not the threat of a deep pass. I look past him to see a single safety lined up in the middle of the field. The safeties a lot of times are back and, as the name suggests, they are there to prevent long plays.. But this safety-- if I can freeze him with a good fake-- he won't be there. No one will be there to help Toast Boy.

Akachi's eyes meet mine just for a millisecond.

He's seeing all the same things.

I think about Red, watching. I want to be a hero.

I put my hands under center, and I start barking out signals. I switch the play. Play action fake. It starts off looking like a run, and if the defense

bites, you can get your guys wide open. The play clock is winding down. Three seconds.

It seems like the stadium has grown quiet. Two seconds. The center snaps the ball. I hold it in two hands, brushing it against Washington's belly. He slams into the line. Their defensive tackles have crashed inside, and their line-backers dive into the middle, crashing over Washington like a wave, smothering him.

I look right. The DB tries to jam Akachi but Akachi sheds the jam, leaving the DB to fall flat on his belly, a facemask full of turf. Akachi is running free down the sideline. I see coach behind him on the sidelines, shaking his head NNNNOOOOOOOO! Eyes bulging. The safety freezes, having taken a step forward on the fake. I sense someone coming at me from my blind side, and I toss the ball high in the air and with all my strength, and then someone slams into me and drives me to the turf.

The defensive end is on top of me, and I feel him punch me in the side. I can't see what has happened, but I hear a rising roar from the crowd, and then a great shout of joy, and the WHOMP as our principal fires off the canon that means--TOUCHDOWN!

I untangle myself from the DE, stand and see Akachi 90 yards away, taking a bow. And I am smiling, happy, because this is the first touchdown pass I have thrown on varsity, and Red was here to see it. Only I glance over to where Red was standing, and she's gone, and suddenly I feel all empty inside, and sick, like a loser, like I just lost the game.

I don't think I can ever feel any worse than I feel, but then I catch a glimpse of Cassie, and by the empty look in her eyes she's seen the whole thing with me looking at Red and then for Red after the big play.

And now I know Cassie knows I wasn't thinking about her at all, didn't look to share my big moment with her, and I feel like I get kicked in the stomach as her pain rebounds onto me. I wish I wasn't like this, I think, again, and I run over to the sidelines feeling like dog poop.

Coach just about blew a vessel in his neck screaming at me for audibling to the pass play, but he couldn't keep it up, and by the time we got the ball back he was trying not to laugh as he sent me back into the game, but he did say, "Don't call any more audibles. Just run the plays, kill the clock and go celebrate."

"Got it," I said. "Yes, sir."

I handed the ball off. Killed the clock. I didn't care anymore anyway.

Chapter 5.

My cyber-stalking finally paid off. I knew she would have to show up sooner or later. Even if she didn't have any social media, which was impossible, she would eventually appear in other people's feeds, and that's where I found her and learned her name: Kisa.

Kisa. I had never met a Kisa. Never heard of a Kisa. I liked that. I liked that she was different, special, unique. I wanted to my life to be different, and dating a girl with a cool name could be part of that, right? And with a cool tattoo. She could be my gateway drug into a more--something- --life.

As I looked at the picture of her in front of a bonfire on the beach, smiling at the camera along with a bunch of other kids, I wanted to be in that picture with her. Do you ever have little flash fantasies, where you imagine some

little moment and it passes in an instant, before you even know whether or not it's real? I have them, like the one I told you about earlier where I was starting quarterback at Michigan?

I had one just then, and she was in my arms, looking up at me. I brushed her hair back from her face, and put my hand to her cheek, and leaned in and kissed her, and as our lips touched I felt my whole- body tingle.

The flash faded, and I felt drool on my chin. Crap. I wiped it off with the back of my arm, looking around as if someone was there to see me acting like an idiot even though I was in my own room. I searched for more images of Kisa, and found the guys who seemed like they hung around her all the time: Nicki and Chris.

Kisa. When I searched around to try and see where they'd gone to school before, where they came from--to follow their social media footsteps--I found nothing. Which, maybe, meant I just didn't look in the right places.

Or, maybe those weren't their real names?

Conspiracy theories started to breed in my brain. They were slavers, and she was their prisoner. They'd kidnapped her from her parents and were holding her for ransom. She was a runaway, and she'd fallen in with a bad crowd. I knew none of them made much sense, but they all led to me concluding that I needed to follow her home, find out what was going on, and probably rescue her.

In the meantime, I saved the picture of her at the bonfire to my phone, and then lay on my bed, staring into those eyes and wondering what it would be like to kiss her for real.

I had football practice every day. No skipping out on that. So, my plan to follow her home--for her own protection--had to wait until Friday. In the meantime, I realized I'd officially gone off the deep end. I kept seeing Kisa everywhere--or I thought I saw her everywhere. I'd get a glimpse of red--any red, or even brown hair with just a hint of red, and I'd look, my heart leaping, thinking I was going to see her, but it would just be a poster with some red letters, or else just a random girl, and my heart would sink.

I saw her in the weight room, and I saw her in the weight room wearing those should-be-illegal (I know, sexist! Sorry!) leggings and tank tops, but she was always with Kyle now, sticking close to him, and since he'd already busted me for hitting on her, I held back, struggling not to stare, which I knew wasn't cool, but at the same time wanting to get a look.

I know, saying that may sound bad, but it wasn't like that. Yes, I had in the past and sometimes still now looked at women, and mostly just at their butts and their boobs, and I guess that's objectifying them, and it's wrong and all that, but with Kisa it was totally different.

I was really into her. I wanted to know her. I mean really know her. Sometimes I would find myself wondering what kind of toothpaste she used, or whether she liked pumpkin flavored smoothies. That kind of stuff. When I looked at her, I wasn't just looking her over like an Instagram picture of Kaitlyn Jenner. I was watching the way she walked, the way she gestured with her hands, the way she tossed her hair. I was watching because she was so amazing, and I wanted and needed to know her as a person. I wanted to just sit and stare into her eyes and ask her everything, and listen until she was my best friend, and we had no secrets, and we were as close as two people had ever been, where we could finish each other's sentences and always be right.

I was that lame and that in love with someone, and I'd never felt this way about anyone, let alone a girl I'd never met. So, I told myself it was okay to look at her because I wanted her. Right?

Then it got weirder.

On Tuesday, I was working out, doing military presses, working my shoulders, and I could see her in the mirror. She was doing one-legged deadlifts, which is almost like a dancer move, where she would hinge over, one long leg sticking straight back, and then hinge up, bending the leg at the knee, as if she were marching. Kyle did deadlifts nearby.

Anyway, she had perfect balance. She didn't shake at all, and she moved with such smooth, fluid ease that I violated the three second rule, because she looked like an athlete, moving with so little effort, and the light from the ceiling danced in her hair as she hinged back, and up, and back and up...

And then, just for a second, or not even a second, I saw the world from her eyes. Suddenly, I found myself looking at the floor, and I felt my leg tighten as I hinged, and it wasn't effortless because I could feel the burn in my leg, and then I rose upright and raised my leg, and I looked right into the mirror, and I saw her looking right back at me. My smooth, pale cheeks were flushed, and my skin glistened with sweat, and then my face turned angry, and I suddenly found myself holding the barbell over my head, my arms shaking, and I looked in the mirror past my own reflection, and saw her, and she turned and walked quickly away as I found myself back in my own body and instantly became aware of a very embarrassing fact: I had a boner.

I put the barbell down, sat on a bench and covered it. Then I felt someone hit me on the shoulder, and say, "Hey!"

I looked up to see Kisa. She looked super pissed. I mean, SUPER pissed: both fists clenched. A vein in her forehead bulging. "Stop thinking about me," she said. "Stay away from me."

"I wasn't looking at you," I lied, lamely, and the way I said it even sounded like the way a bad actor on a Disney channel show would say it, in a "I am lying right now" way that just sounded so pathetic.

She punched me on the shoulder again. "Bullshit."

"Hey," I said, embarrassed, confused. I didn't know what I felt after that weird, out of body experience. "What the hell?"

"I know what just happened," she said. "Stay away from me. For your own sake."

And then she marched off.

I couldn't help but watch her in the mirror as she marched away. My boner had gotten harder, and I had to sit there trying to cover it up, but my mind raced. I know what just happened. Did she mean my boner? Or the out of body experience?

The world tilted sideways and started spinning. I shook my head, closed my eyes, still covering up my stupid hard-on, and I decided she was right. I had to stop all this. It was too weird. That feeling, like I'd been in her body for a second, had seen the world through her eyes, had felt the tightness of a bra around my chest--it scared me.

I needed to get my mind focused on something else. Something else. Something else.

My boner finally deflated. I got up, completely unaware of anyone or anything, just totally in my head. I went into the locker room, found my phone. Texted Cassie. Meet me after school. Parking lot.

She texted back a dancing banana.

Yes. That. How nuts had I been, thinking I wanted someone weird and exotic? No. I didn't. I needed Cassie. A nice, casual, normal girlfriend. Someone I didn't need to know everything about. Someone I could not think about every minute of every day. This wasn't a fake relationship. This was a normal relationship. Like a grown-up relationship that fit like a pair of baggy old sweatpants.

Of course things had cooled. We'd been together for a long time--a little over a year. It was normal for things to cool down. She was Miss Normal. I was Mr. Normal. We were the ultimate normals.

And I would definitely do a better job of being her boyfriend from now on. No more taking her for granted. No way.

I found Cassie sitting on the back of my pickup truck, kicking her red Converse All-Stars back and forth, with their always snow-white laces, a playful smile on her face. "What's up?" she said.

I walked up and between her legs, took her face in my hands and kissed her. I lingered, keeping our lips together, our mouths. When the kiss ended she said, "Wow. What was that for?"

"For being the best girlfriend in the world."

She giggled, cocking her head to the side. "You sure are acting funny."

I slipped my hands under her legs and lifted her up, twirling her around and setting her on her feet, then grabbing her hand. "I had a -- a moment of - what's the word I'm looking for?"

"Clarity?" she said.

"Yes! Exactly. A moment of clarity, and I realized how lucky I am to have you, and us, and that I wanted to make sure you knew all that romantic stuff. I think I could say that better."

"You said it fine," she said, kind of bumping into me. "It's--you make me so happy."

"Good," I said, and we started walking toward the gym and playing fields. We both had practice. "Awesome. I want to do that more. I know, or I feel, like I've been--not there."

"I knew you'd come back," Cassie said. "My mom told me--that going away thing? It's just the way guys are."

"Well, I'm going to be a better guy, then."

Cassie laughed and squeezed my hand.

And I felt good, and I really meant every word I said. I wasn't lying to her or leading her on, or at least I didn't know I was lying to her. The thing is, I was lying to myself.

Because, really? That moment? The one where I felt so connected to Kisa that I was her for a second?

What scared me was that I wanted more of it. More of her. All of her.

CHAPTER 6

For the next couple days, anytime Kisa started to pop into my mind, I just started running through our playbook, going through my progressions, imagining running them against different defenses. It worked. My dad always used to say, "Control Your thoughts, control your world." It probably came from some dumb Instagram thing or whatever, but I needed to control my thoughts, and I felt super great over my ability to push crazy Kisa out of my mind.

Tuesday, I sprawled out on my bed, controller in hand, playing Madden. I'd picked Cleveland today, which was not my usual team, but I wanted to win with a really bad team. So, as I dropped back to pass, scanning over the gaping holes in the Bengal's 3 deep zone- and then I wasn't there anymore.

I found myself staring at a book, lying on my belly with grinding guitars and drums slamming away as someone sang there would be no sad tomorrow. I was kind of kicking my feet in time to the music, my whole body kind of just bopping, and I blinked, pushing myself up, long red hair cascading around my face, and I brushed it back with one hand as I glanced around some stranger's room, and then looked at my hand and saw chipped and

blotchy black nail polish on my fingernails, with a bunch of bracelets sliding up my forearm, and I realized I was Kisa again. My room--her room--smelled of some kind of hippie incense, and maybe weed, and I saw piles and piles of books everywhere. I became aware of the weight on my chest, and looked down to see her body, and felt the bra straps on my shoulders.

I started to panic as I rolled to sit on the edge of her bed. I was Kisa, but this time it was lasting longer, and I was sitting here in her room, and I suddenly had a terrified thought--what if I stayed her? What if I was stuck like this?

I looked down at my chest--her chest--and bit my lip, looking down at the rounded swellings, feeling the weight of them in the bra, a band tight across my back, the straps on my shoulders. Her hair fell across my eyes, and I looked down through strands of red, lifting my hands toward her chest, but then felt it would be creepy and weird to cop a feel of myself and wrong in so many ways.

I saw her phone sitting on her bed. I pulled my thoughts away from her body, my body, this female shape I wore, and saw her phone on her bed. Was she in my body right now? Should I call her?

But then it started flashing, and I looked--brushing my hair back, so annoying!-- I saw the call was coming from my number, and I picked up the phone, swiped and said, "Hello?" My voice sounded squeaky and small in my head, like a child's voice, and I cringed in shame.

"Close your eyes," a dude said. Was that what I sounded like?

"What?" I squeaked.

"Do it!"

I closed my eyes, and the music stopped. I didn't feel a pound of hair tickling my neck, a bunch of bracelets on my wrist. I didn't feel the weight on my chest. I opened my eyes. I sat on my bed in my room, and my game had even been paused. My phone was upside down beside me.

I shook my head. What the hell had just happened? I mean, I knew what had just happened, but what had just happened was impossible, so it couldn't have happened, right?

I picked up my phone and tapped Recent Calls, then the one at the top, the one that had to belong to Kisa. I needed to talk to her. To understand. But when I clicked, my phone informed me she had blocked my number.

So, I called Cassie. I needed to re-normal myself. To reconnect to something real. To talk and hear my voice, which I was quite proud of now it changed, and I needed to be a man talking to his girl.

We talked, and that night I texted her a bunch of emojis, and then as I lay down as song kept running through my head. The song I had heard in Kisa's room.

And then a bunch of other stuff connected in my brain, and I remembered the band was called The Muffs, and I so totally loved them and their music, especially Kim Shattuck, because she was a pioneer in punk and really an amazing woman, and I really admired her because she didn't take any shit. Even though I'd never met her, I pretty much considered her a Mother.

Except none of that was true. I knew I didn't know who The Muffs were, and I had never heard of Kim Shattuck, let alone considered her a Mother, but at the same time those thoughts and memories were now firmly implanted in my brain, so firmly that I found myself tossing and turning, unable to sleep or relax because my Spotify playlist of Fem Punk Super Bitches was gone, and I loved that music, and so I finally just got my phone out and recreated the playlist, filling it up with The Muffs and Sleator-Kinney, and L7, and I was jamming to the music on my headphones, and hearing it for the first time, but also finding it again, like something I'd lost and forgotten; and now it came back to me, all this music that had been so much a part of me, and I needed it, needed it to fill me, because somehow being Kisa had created these spaces in me that needed to be filled now with her, with her stuff.

I felt like I was reading a book that had made me who I was, but that I'd forgotten it, hadn't read it in so long, but now I was reading it again, and I was remembering--Oh, yeah, this is why I am who I am. I was remembering who was, but the memories weren't mine, and it kind of scared me, but I felt so high, so intensely inspired and joyful, that I couldn't stop downloading Kisa's music into my brain, couldn't stop myself from becoming her a little bit.

Finally, after dancing around my room like a crazy person for hours, some time after 2 am I managed to drift off to sleep, my headphones still in my ears as The Julie Ruin sang "Oh, Come On."

The next morning I woke up when the music cut off and my phone sounded my alarm. I sat up feeling disorientated and confused, reaching up to brush back long hair that wasn't there, memories of the last night flashing through my mind, bringing a mixture of shame, confusion-- and most of all euphoria.

Euphoria? Who uses words like that?

I showered, shaved, and didn't have long to wonder how much more Kisa might have infiltrated my brain: I had to fight off the urge to sneak into my sister's room and "borrow" some eyeliner. I suddenly thought I looked weird without it, but I also felt I would look weird with it. I knew it was another of Kisa's thoughts or traits or whatever. I needed to talk to Kisa, find out what was happening to me. To us. I needed to do something. But right now I had to get to school, so I did my best to wrench my thoughts away from Kisa and my weird out of body experience.

In any case, for now I seemed stuck with my new girl punk obsession. As I got in my truck, I found myself humming "Bruise Violet," and I sidled into my seat and said, "Siri, play Bruise Violet."

I had to hear it, wanted to sing along. It was pretty much, like, one of my all-time favorite songs, ever since 7th grade and just now.

I watched for Kisa all day, but didn't see her. I saw Orange Hair at one point, and I was kinda pretty sure he gave me this look, like he knew what had happened, but then some other kids walked between us, and when they passed he was gone.

Cassie and I sat together at lunch, just the two of us, at a table in the corner. I had this powerful impulse to tell her about my newfound enthusiasm for Riot Grrrl punk bands, but I held it back. I didn't want her to know I had this girl in my head now.

I looked over and saw the Tiresians all huddled together, eating, seeming not to pay any attention to me at all. And then I realized I was doing it

again, letting Kisa control my thoughts, and I pulled my attention back to Cassie.

"So, what do you think?" she asked as she spooned some yogurt out of a little glass jar that read Oui!

I had been half listening, enough to say, "I love it! I think we would be great as The Lannister's. Only, do you have a black dress I can borrow?"

Cassie laughed, then got serious. "That would get people talking, wouldn't it?"

I panicked. "What? I was just kidding."

"No, totally," Cassie said. "With a wig and the right make-up? You would make a great Cersei."

Given my muddled brain and all the girl stuff that had seeped in, I felt really embarrassed, and it freaked me out that maybe Cassie was sensing it, the shift, this new part of me. "No way," I said. "No way."

"Spoilsport," she said, doing her fake frown. She looked really cute when she did it, like a cartoon character of something. It was then I realized she'd just been teasing me the whole time, and I laughed.

"You had me going," I said. "Just for a minute!"

"You should have seen the look on your face!" Cassie said. "Omigod, I wish I had a picture. You would look ridiculous."

I wanted to regain the upper hand, make sure she could see what a dude I was, how not afraid I was of having a feminine side, so I said, "I'll have you know I look stunning in black."

"I'm sure. Now, tell me."

"What?" She'd caught me off guard.

"Tell me what's going on with you. I can tell you have something you want to say."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, feeling queasy. She could tell? Could sense it?

"Dylan, you said you were going to try harder. This is the time. Right now. You have this, I don't know, sparkle or something. You started to tell me something three times, and stopped. I'm a girl, and that wall you put up, that barrier or whatever, it scares me. It makes me feel you don't trust me, and that I don't know you, the real you, and we can't ever get close if you won't tell me."

The passion in her voice, her eyes, it hit me. Hard. And I did want to be better to her, for her. But how could I tell her this?

"You have to be willing to be vulnerable," Cassie said. "I read about it on the Huffington Post."

"I thought women liked strong men?"

"Strong men aren't afraid of their feelings."

"Did that come from Instagram?"

"If you aren't even going to try..." She started to get up, which shocked me because she'd pretty much put up with my crapola forever. I grabbed her arm.

"Okay."

She sat back down.

I did not like this whole conversation at all. I did not like the Huffington Post. My stomach ached, and my head seemed to be buzzing. She wanted to get to know me, the real me, and I wanted to tell her, but I wasn't even sure who I was anymore, and as that thought crossed my mind, the words came, and I just said what I'd been thinking.

"I don't know who I am anymore."

Cassie sat back. It wasn't what she'd expected to hear, but she absorbed it and just said, "Why? What's going on?"

"This probably won't make any sense at all, and I don't know the right way to say it--"

"So just say it--"

"So, last night I found this playlist of punk bands, and I listened to it for about all night, really, and I am totally in love with this music I used to hate or kind of didn't even know existed, and the songs keep running in my head, and I feel like I am suddenly becoming not a whole different person but a different person than the one I'm supposed to be. Does that make sense?"

"Kind of?" Cassie said. "Sort of."

"You don't get it," I said, turning away, that feeling in my stomach getting worse.

Cassie put her hand on my back. "I don't get it," she said. "But that doesn't mean you close me out and give up. Help me understand."

"I don't understand it myself."

"I don't understand why it's so upsetting to you that you like Punk music. I mean, it isn't my thing, but it's music. Lots of people like it. It doesn't make you weird."

I didn't look at her, but I just covered my face and said, "The part that's weird, and you probably won't get this, or maybe it will make you mad, but the stuff I got into--?" I had to say it. I'd gone this far. "It's all this Riot Grrrl stuff."

"Riot Grrrl?"

I turned to her, feeling a sudden lightness just having said it out loud, and suddenly it seemed ridiculous to me, and I chuckled. "Girl Power punk."

Cassie laughed. "Girl Power?"

"Pretty ridiculous, I know."

Cassie tilted her head to the side and looked me right in the eyes. "I think it's--well, sweet."

"Oh, god," I said. "So, do you want to dump me now?"

"No," Cassie said, and I could hear the truth of it in her voice, which had gotten kind of hoarse. "You being honest with me like this? That is such a turn on, I want to," and then she just did, grabbing me by the shirt collar and pulling me in for a kiss.

"Knock it off!" Mr. Harrel said from across the room. "No PDAs!"

We broke it off just as the bell rang and before it had lingered long enough to turn into detention. Our school was lax compared to some where even just holding hands got people demerits, but they had their limits. It seemed strange to me that schools spent so much time battling against teenagers displaying affection. I felt like we needed a lot more affection, not less, but the school just wanted to turn us into soulless robots.

As I walked Cassie to class, I didn't know if that was my thought or Kisa's, or maybe a mixture of both. The thought of Kisa filled me with the impulse to look around for her, but I fought it off, keeping my attention focused on Cassie. I'd just told her I was into Girl Power, and she hadn't dumped me.

More than ever, I saw how amazing she was, how she seemed to accept me no matter what, and even when I was becoming someone else.

Was that love?

The thought scared me. I didn't know if I had ever been loved. Not like that. Not even by my parents. Especially not by my parents.

A love like that, I felt, would change me just as much as having bits of Kisa in my head had changed me.

Was there any way to be a part of someone else's life without becoming someone else? Without losing me?

I knew I had to confront Kisa, and I thought I'd see her in weight lifting class. I'd seen her at lunch, and she'd ignored but not avoided me. I decided to psyche myself up, so I put on my Bose headphones and surrendering to my Kisa impulses I put Bikini Kill's song "Rebel Kill" which evidently had been the song I'd used to psyche myself up, when I got my first tattoo when I was a 13 year old girl.

Other kids headed into the weight room. If they noticed me we exchanged a nod. No one cared what I was up to. Finally, Kisa came around the corner, saw me and stopped dead in her tracks.

I pulled my earphones out of my ears and let them dangle around my neck. "Let's talk," I said.

Kisa shrugged. I walked up to her and took her arm, but she shook me off, then when I tried to lead her out a side door where we could get some privacy she pushed in front of me, slamming the door open with both hands.

It was cold outside. Kisa crossed her arms over her chest, looking up at me with fierce, angry eyes. We both looked at each other, shifting awkwardly. I could smell weed in the air, someone skipping class, smoking grass somewhere around here.

"What the hell is going on?" I said.

"Look, I'm sorry," Kisa said. "I thought I could control it."

"Control what? What is this?"

"That weed smells so good," Kisa said.

"What's happening to me?"

"You wouldn't have believed me, but now you were me for that time, really me, more than a flash, you're ready. The thing is, I'm a Vaguerant. I can switch bodies with other people."

I shook my head. "Switch? So, you did that to me on purpose?"

"No. It, well, sometimes I can't control it. With some people I can't control it. Especially people like you. Like me."

"Like me?" I looked around. I felt myself getting more annoyed, frustrated. It seemed like I was going to have to drag this all out of her, and despite my having been her, really her, I still found it all hard to believe, and so I finally just lost it and shouted, "Fix it! I don't care why you are or what you are, but since yesterday I have you inside my head, and I want you out!"

"Oh, shit," she said. "I knew there was some noise in the system."

"Kisa, I feel like we are having two separate conversations here. Fix me. Just fix me."

"I can't," she said.

"Can't?"

"When we exchanged bodies, we picked up some noise from each other's systems. It's like we photo-bombed each other's minds. Once it's in there, it doesn't go away."

"That is so not acceptable," I said, feeling gross, dirty, infected. "I am obsessed with girl bands now, and have all this Girl Power stuff in my brain."

Kisa covered her mouth, stifling a laugh.

"It's not funny," I said.

"I'm sorry," Kisa said. "It's just, you being a dude and a football player and all."

"That's what makes it not funny," I said.

"It'll fade as it mashes up into your psyche. Like when you first hear a song and you can't stop listening to it for a while but then it becomes just another song? And, if it makes you feel any better, I had to resist the urge to spray my whole body with Axe this morning."

It was my turn to chuckle. "Why is this happening to me? I heard you say you're a body swapper or whatever, but why with me?"

"It's because--" and she looked away, blushing. "I'm- you- when I crush on someone I can't control it."

"Crushing?" Now I felt kind of embarrassed. "So, you do like me."

"Yes. But I didn't want this to happen. It's something I need to control."

"And that's why you were so weird. But, as long as you have a crush on me, this will keep happening?"

"It will, and I need to tell you some more things, some others reasons it happened and will keep happening."

"It's going to keep happening?"

"Yes."

"Will I keep taking parts of you?"

"Probably."

"Probably? What does that mean? Probably?"

"It means probably. But, please, just stop with all the questions and let me explain--"

"What is this?" Mr. Harrell said, coming around the corner, a big grin on his face. "Shouldn't you kids be in class?"

"Yeah," I said, and we both headed into the school. Mr. Harrell watched, so we had to go through the door to the weight room.

"We have to talk more," I said as we went in.

"We will," Kisa said, and then she walked away. "In the meantime, try not to think about me."

There were only twenty minutes left in class, so I didn't change but went into the weight room and did a quick workout, my headphones on, Teri Gender Bender and The Melvins blasting through Rebel Girl.

When class ended, I followed Kisa out, meaning to get more answers, but her weird brothers were there, were there waiting for her, and as soon as they saw me they took positions between us, bowing up, clenching their fists. "Problems?" The one with orange hair said.

Standing behind them, Kisa shook her head "no" and put a finger to her lips, mouthing ssshhh.

"Nah," I said, resisting the urge to get in Red's face. I hated that this creep thought he had backed me down, and when he smirked and said, "This I think not be the case," when I turned away, the only thing that kept me from getting in his face was the look of warning in Kisa's eyes.

What the hell was going on? I felt like I was more confused instead of less, and I kicked myself for not getting her to unblock my number.

CHAPTER 7

After our meeting, I found it much harder to drag my thoughts away from Kisa. Her partial answers left my mind buzzing with questions and confusion, and I couldn't think about what she said without thinking about her, so I had to try not to think about my situation. But my new found obsession with girl punk left me constantly aware of my situation, as I found my mind locked on what amounted to a seven year obsession with these bands and I couldn't stop listening to them, searching for them, discovering them again for what felt like both the first and the one millionth time.

I called Cassie and talked to her, which helped me clear my mind for a time. I played some Madden, and then I actually did some homework, but still with all that I found myself bored at around nine, and I got out my laptop and Googled Body Swappers.

Links to goofy videos. Anima wikis.

I tried Body Swapping in Real Life. More nonsense, but as I scrolled through the not helpful links I found myself thinking about her standing there behind her brothers, those green eyes full of warning, and something else-- fear? It made me angry to think those weirdos were scaring her. I had this strong urge to protect her. She was so cute, and--

I found myself staring at toes, a little brush in my hands. Dark purple nail polish glistened on my big toe, and I wiggled it, watching the light shift and sparkle. My other toes were covered with faded green polish, and I knew I was Kisa again. I looked around and saw the little jar of nail polish, put the brush back in it, and looked around for her phone. I could feel my hair piled on my head in some kind of bun, and though a few loose strands hovered around my face, tickling my cheeks, it was much less annoying than it had been. I silently thanked Kisa for putting our hair up.

I wondered if I should just close my eyes, and I did, and I could feel him- I mean her--there as our brains started to interface, and an impulse over took me, and I just couldn't help but lift my hands and cup my breasts..

"Perve!" I heard Kisa shout as our minds passed, and then I was back in my room, cupping air, grinning, amused with myself, but also hoping she wasn't too mad. And then I remembered. Kisa had used my phone to call her phone. I did have her number. Maybe she'd unblocked it? I dialed, but it was still blocked. Damn.

I searched my brain, looking for any new parts of her, but I didn't find any. No harm done, I supposed, thinking about how it had felt to feel hands on my breasts, to have breasts, to touch them and feel them and feel myself feeling them, and--

I saw Kisa's room again, just for a second, and I pulled myself back, away, back to my own room and my own body. Crap. I really had to stop thinking about Kisa. So, I did what I had to do and took a very cold shower.

A very long, cold shower.

By the time I woke up in the morning, I realized I had paid a price for my trip into Kisa's mind. I fought off the urge to sneak into my sister's room and borrow some of her leggings, but I found that part easy enough, at least compared to the bigger problem. The bigger problem, harder to ignore, was this feeling of emptiness, like I'd been hollowed out, or lost a piece of myself. It hurt, actually hurt, and I knew I needed Kisa to fill it. I felt drawn to her more than ever, and struggled harder not to think about her, which just made the void within grow deeper, stronger, more painful.

I thought about Kisa, how she couldn't crush on anyone without swapping with them, how she had to struggle to stay away from people, how liking someone had become a source of pain for her. How terrible that must be, to feel that just liking someone was dangerous and wrong. That she couldn't even have a normal crush without swapping into their bodies, freaking them out.

I felt so bad for her. How lonely that had to be for her, and how unfair it was that she had to feel like some freak who could never love or find love.

I was her for a moment. Just a flash. Lacing up her Chuck Taylors. We yanked ourselves back into our bodies, I could feel her irritation as we passed each other, the word "Stop!"

I pulled my mind away, started running football plays in my head, anything to keep me from thinking about Kisa.

When I was with Cassie I found I could focus on her now, and I wanted to, needed to because she really did ground me now in an even deeper way. I found her between classes, we ate lunch with our crew, and right after school we found a place to engage in some serious Public Affectioning. I love the feeling of having her in my arms, feeling our bodies pressing together, feeling her breath, and when we kissed it felt like we were kissing again for the first time. I felt like I could really feel her--feel us--when we kissed, and I knew by the way we were kissing that things were good between us now, maybe better than ever.

It got intense, and Cassie had to push me away, and we were both breathing hard. The tip of Cassie's nose had turned pink, our breath steaming in the cold air. I reached out to touch her cheek, running my thumb over her soft skin, and said, "You have amazing skin."

Cassie kind of crinkled her nose, but then her eyes brightened and she said, "So do you."

I don't think anyone had ever complimented me on my skin, and then again I had never noticed her skin before, either, but it felt weird and good at the same time.

Kisa didn't show up at school. The emptiness grew deeper, more painful. I decided I had to take matters into my own hands. I needed to know her, to know what she knew. I didn't know if this would trigger another change, or if I would end up suddenly wanting to wear lipstick or something, but I decided to finally follow through on my plan and pay her a visit.

Chapter 8.

We had an open week, meaning no football game. Coach gave us the weekend off, starting Friday. I had told Cassie I needed to work on my truck Friday but promised to go to Monmouth Mall with her on Saturday and spend a nice, normal day with my nice, normal girlfriend. Friday, I would pay a visit to the girl who'd infected my mind.

It felt wrong, but it felt necessary. I had a few challenges. For example, I had no idea where she lived, so I would first have to go into full on undercover mode and tail her back to her place, something I had achieved many times in numerous video games.

The trickier part would be following her home without thinking about her, but I thought I could do it if I just kind of let my body function largely on autopilot while I kept running plays in my mind. I had driven all over and a lot of times could not remember anything about the drive, so I knew my mind could be engaged in a task without me being engaged in the task, if that makes sense.

Friday after school I hung out in the parking lot, watching that black, Murder Van that Kisa and her brothers traveled around in all the time. One of them was there, hanging out. Nicki- or Chris? I couldn't tell which one of her weird brothers it was, though one had Kool-ade orange hair, while the other had dyed white, so I should have been able to tell. Anyway, Orange Head was there with the door open, talking to some burnouts, smoking. I didn't know where the other two were.

As for me, I had gone full undercover for my outfit, with my Mets hat pulled down low, dark sunglasses, slouching in my cab, watching it all like a character from a cop movie, even though I really felt more like a character from a parody of a cop movie. I'd even pulled on a dark sweatshirt and

black jeans, though I wasn't sure how they would help me stay invisible bathed in the warm light of a Fall day. I was all set to follow them home and spy on Kisa in a totally non-creepy way.

A breeze sent rust colored leaves tumbling across the road.

I checked my phone. 3:11, exactly two minutes since the last time I checked it.

I saw some kids walking across the lawn outside the B Building. Based on my keen observational skills, I rapidly concluded they were up to--nothing. Pretty much nothing.

I continued to watch them, and they neared a car, stood there talking for a while, and the thing was they did absolutely nothing interesting the whole time. I kept watching, hoping they would argue, or kiss, or maybe pull out a joint--anything. But they talked, separated, went to their cars and drove off.

I checked my phone. 3:14.

I glanced in my mirrors. Peeked around my seat out the back window. Orange Head was still just sitting there yapping, smoking with some other burnouts. Damn. Where was Kisa?

I thought about turning the key in my ignition, driving home. I pretty much felt creepy, secretly following a girl to her house, and I did not want to get a reputation as THAT GUY. But, I'd been in her room, in her body, so the rules didn't count, did they? Of course, I also had to worry this would take me deeper, that I would end up with more of Kisa's personality in my

psyche. I didn't know. It all seemed like a bad idea, a busted play I should audible out of, but that emptiness, that void, it just had to be answered.

I just sat there and sat there, the sun setting, the light falling at greater angles, the shadows growing longer as the air grew colder.

I found myself on the football field, facing what seemed like an impenetrable wall of defenders, all charging at me, ready to slam me to the ground. I heard Kisa shouting and looked over to see her on the sidelines. She wore a tight sweater and a pleated skirt, pom poms--and she was cheering me on, shouting, and I was really surprised because I didn't know she was a cheerleader and anyway I didn't think she was the cheerleading type, you know?

Kyle was standing next to her, smirking, his helmet under his arm. I distinctly heard him say, "Loser."

I looked back to see those defensive players closing in on me. It was slow motion, like The Matrix. I could see their eyes, glittering with feral hate and they had me. They had me bottled up. But I had to score. I had to, because she was watching, and he was watching, and I had to prove to her I was a winner, I was the guy who could protect her, take care of her-- all that caveman stuff.

I chopped my feet and executed a perfect spin move. The first guy who tried to tackle me dove, arms outstretched, waving at the empty space where I used to be before pathetically crashing to the ground.

Two guys--huge guys, like 6'6 and 300 pounds--moved toward me in a pincer movement, but I made an impossible, lightning fast cut and slithered

between them, laughing like the Road Runner as they collided into each other, their helmets popping as they fell to the ground, staring at stars.

I could see a clear path now. A clear path but for one person. He didn't even have a helmet on, and I knew him right away from his bright orange Kool-ade hair. He made a growling noise, baring his teeth. I ran right at him. I wouldn't dodge this dope smoking goon. I wouldn't need my spin move. I would run right over his weed infused butt.

He took one last toke, tossing his joint aside in an arc of smoke and fire, and then he lowered his shoulders, bracing himself.

I lowered mine, smiling, and drove right into him, knocking him backwards right onto his ass, and stomped on his chest as I ran over him, and the smoke poured out of his nose and mouth as he cried out--

I heard the sound of metal sliding on metal, and then a metallic thunk. I snapped awake and saw the driver's side door of the murder van slam shut. White Hair was behind the wheel, firing it up, smoke pouring from the tail pipe as the van shook and rattled, coughing and wheezing before finally shaking to life with a great lurch.

Was Kisa with them? I hadn't seen her. But she had to be. They always seemed to go everywhere together when they weren't in class. I looked around, unsure, but then turned the key to my own truck, which of course turned over with smooth precision and--

Stalled. Shit. No!

I turned the key, and my ignition ground without catching.

No! No!

I pumped the gas. Turned it again. The Murder Van backed out of its parking spot. Damn. "Come on! Come on you piece of shit!" I pounded on the steering wheel, watching as the van started forward, moving toward the exit from the parking lot.

Chuck chuck chuck chuck. Nothing. Damn. Damn. Damn.

I took a deep breath and changed my tone. "Come on, babe," I said, stroking the dash board. "I need you right now." I turned the key. The engine turned over. "Thank you, thank you!" I said, pushing in the clutch, putting it in reverse.

The Murder Van had reached the exit, and it was about to slide out into traffic. My heart leapt. I might lose them. They could get out of my sight, turn any different direction. I couldn't let that happen. But, if I slammed on the gas and raced after them, my cover would be blown, the operation over.

I despaired. I am sorry to say, though it made more sense to me later on, I actually felt tears burning at the corners of my eyes, the thought that I wasn't going to get to spend some time "with" her was so painful to me.

And then I caught a break. Divine intervention? Or some kind of intervention. A truck slowed and stopped, blocking the driveway. A window rolled down. The driver shouted something. White Hair poked his arm out the van window, pointing. The truck took off, and it gave me just enough time to slide into position to follow them, but not too close, letting a car even pass between us as I had seen on more than one television show.

I had bro country playing from my phone, willfully fighting my way back to my core self, old self, pre-Kisa self. Blake Shelton was singing:

What's your double dare, your go all in?

The craziest thing you ever did?

Plain as your name in this tattoo

Look on my arm, mine would be you

I followed them safely up the road to Keansburg, through some of the twisty, jacked, pothole ridden streets of a shabby, busted town full of weird, random shacks with sagging roofs and crooked walls that screamed "Irish Pride."

They came to a little bungalow at the end of a cul de sac. The lots on either side were barren--just tall, swaying grass and the glinting of broken bottles. They parked the van on the street even though they had a narrow little driveway, and all three tumbled out of the van, laughing about something as they made their way to the house. Kisa was smiling, waving her arms, telling some story. I thought she looked in my direction at one point, and I slid deeper into my seat, pulling my hat down, and when I looked back up all three had gone inside, closing the front door behind them. I could see tired, grey wood that looked like dead skin through the ragged, peeling red paint.

During Fall in New Jersey, the sun starts setting pretty early, and by this time it was already dusk. Lights came on inside the house, cutting through gaps in the curtains, slicing across the yard in wedges of yellow.

It would have made sense to wait a little longer, until it was totally dark and my spy clothes would totally hide me from view, but I couldn't wait. Heart racing, I climbed out of my truck, carefully closing the door to make sure it made no sound, and then I walked into one of the empty lots, crouching, walking through the tall grass, which stuck to my clothes, tugging at me as I moved, leaving sticky burs that clung to the cloth of my sweatshirt. I ignored it, creeping toward the tumble-down house, thinking I would get her out of there, talk my parents into letting her live with us. She so deserved better than this place.

Trying to stay out of the light, I snuck up to what I thought was probably a bedroom window, hoping it was hers, and promising myself that if she was in any way indecent I would cover my eyes immediately. I think I really meant it. I'm pretty sure I meant it.

But instead of getting another glimpse of her room, her life, I saw a cloud of smoke emerging from a mop of orange hair that had crumpled itself into an old padded leather couch. Stuffing leaked from tears in the baby pooh brown leather. He had a controller in his hands, and my eyes bugged out to see he was playing video games on an ancient kind of television that was as deep as a refrigerator, with a square bulbous screen of glass, and a fuzzy picture with washed out colors. It was like something from a weird old movie, and the game he was playing was, too; on the screen, a giant lizard was pulverizing 2-dimensional cartoon looking buildings while green blobs that were supposed to be helicopters spat squares at him.

I shook my head. I had seen this lame game at an old school arcade in Red Bank. My Dad took me there when it first opened, and he kept boring me

with all these stories about how he'd played these games when he was my age, and they were "the coolest."

He kept talking about quarters and how you used to have to pay for each game... blah... blah...

I pretended to like that crap hole, but really it sucked as much as my dad's ass boring stories.

Anyway, the Orange Menace had this blissed-out smile on his face playing that stupid game, which only confirmed how much of a freak he was.

But what was this? Sitting cross-legged on the floor at his feet--a scrawny little kid, a girl, with long black hair that trailed all the way to the floor, wearing an over-sized NY Giant's jersey. Who was this?

The smell of garlic and olive oil wafted from the house into the yard, and my stomach rumbled.

I crouched low and circled around to the next window. As I got there, I heard something hiss. Looking down to the broken boards covering the crawl space under the house, eyes glittered at me from the darkness, and I jumped back, falling into the weeds and grass. The glittering eyes were joined by fangs, and then a black cat yelped and leapt out of the crawlspace, scampering off through the grass and into the night.

"What was that?" I heard Kisa say, and it sounded like she was right on the other side of that window.

I crawled to the wall, flattening myself against it, right under the window. The curtain above me switched aside, letting a wide, bright square of light shine across the grass. A shadow moved back and forth, and Kisa said, "Did you hear that?"

"Stupid cat," someone answered.

"Sounded--... bigger." The curtain swung shut, the rectangle of light shrinking back to a wedge.

I could hear creaking as feet walked across the floor.

Turning my hat around, I rose just enough to look over the windowsill and through the slit in the curtain. Wow. There she was. Kisa. She was laying-lying?--I never did get that right-- on her bed, and she had a book in her hands--an actual paper book. It was kind of amazing to see her like that, just her being herself, not knowing anyone was watching. She had a little smile on her face, and her eyes sparkled with delight. She eagerly turned a page, snorting at what she read, then rolled over onto her side, the book in her hands.

I loved watching her read. I felt like I could just watch her read forever. I could see her body rising and falling as she breathed. I loved the way her hair fell across her shoulders, the way she hooked her ankles together, the way she reacted to everything she was reading with her whole body, her face so full of light, so alive.

I had never seen her like this. I had been her, but never seen her. That feeling of emptiness grew lighter, felt less painful, and when I felt that tugging, that feeling that I now knew meant a switch was coming, I pulled

back, thinking about football, there but not there, letting my brain divide and splitting my focus.

And then, I thought. Oh, shit. No.

Hanging on the dingy wood paneling of her room, the newest and shiniest thing in the room, was a poster for Blood Wolf Academy. It featured a guy half morphed into a wolf, one arm protectively around a pretty but dorky looking girl with big glasses and a kind of nerdy librarian fashion sense, and with his other arm he clawed a pale, hipster vampire who probably listened to emo music all day and was really 326 years old and still hitting on teenage girls.

I knew the poster well, and the cover of the book, and the movie posters, and the soundtrack. My sister had been totally into it along with it seemed like every girl ever, and I thought it was so totally dumb and I asked my sister all the time--"How can you have a crush on werewolves? They aren't real."

But she would just roll her eyes at me and go back to reading, or watching, or listening to the movie soundtrack like I was the dumb one.

But I wasn't the dumb one. Girls who crushed on vampires and werewolves were dumb, but now everything I thought and knew about the world titled and threatened to come crashing down because it seemed like Kisa read this stuff, and I knew Kisa was smart and fierce and into powerful women who played guitar, but that didn't match with Blood Wolf Academy, did it?

But then I looked at that poster again, and suddenly I felt like I saw it from her eyes. And it was, like, oh wait. I get it! Of course. It was so totally romantic! I mean, those two hunky guys wanted that girl! They both--

Football. Twenty-three all go. Sluggo 21. I had to pull back. I was interfacing with Kisa, and I had to pull back.

I heard the front door open and slam. Oh, hell. I crouched down deep in the grass until the tops of the stalks came right up to my nose, just my eyes and the top of my head peering out into the night. I heard footsteps crunch down the driveway. Saw Orange Crush walk up to the van, open the door, get something out. A black bag, like a bowling bag. He walked back toward the house.

My nose started to itch: the pollen from this stink ass ghetto grass. My nose twitched. I opened my mouth wide, breathing through my mouth, my eyes starting to water. I could feel the pollen inside my nose, and I shook my head side to side, trying to keep from sneezing. Damn these poor-ass people and their crappy weed-choked yards.

Orange passed out of sight. I relaxed, and just as I did a thunderous sneeze ripped out me. I mean one of those insanely loud sneezes, like your weird uncle makes at the dinner table and everyone thinks he's faking it because he's a crazy dick? That kind of loud sneeze.

"What the hell?" I heard Orange say from the front door, almost to himself, but with a slight edge of concern.

"Is someone out there?" I heard Kisa say, and then the creaking of her bed-springs.

I held still for a whole nano-second, thinking to stay frozen in the dark, but then instinct took over and I just found myself turning, running away from

the house through the empty lot toward a metal chain link fence and the lights of the next tumble-down Keansburg shack.

"Asshole!" I heard Orange shout from somewhere behind me, and glancing back I saw the curtain to Kisa's room open, saw her peering out into the night as Orange ripped through the wedge of light, his face a mask of angry determination.

I leapt, clawing my hands into the fence links, panic giving me speed and strength as I rose up and over, launching myself off the top of the fence, dropping to the ground, hitting and rolling just like I'd done in football drills for years, sprinting through the yard.

"Pervert!" Orange yelled, slamming into the fence.

Dogs barked. Cats yowled. Porch lights lit up. I ran an evasive pattern down a few streets, ducking behind some garbage cans at one point when a Keansburg cop car cruised past, and then I made my way back to my truck, climbed in and headed home, grinning like the love-struck fool I was, and with one idea clearly lodged in my mind: I really totally completely needed to read Blood Wolf Academy.

Chapter 9

I pulled my truck up to the curb at my house behind my sister's tan Corolla. My Mom and Dad's cars already crowded the driveway. I looked around, feeling a little paranoid, but no one seemed to have followed me. My Mom was walking around in the front yard, her phone plastered to her ear, a half empty glass of wine in her hand as she howled: "These people are ridiculous! Can you even believe it?"

She didn't notice me as I let myself into the house. The living room was empty, as was the kitchen. I went into the kitchen, dug some frozen burritos out of the freezer, tossed them in the microwave. I could hear the murmur of voices coming from the basement, and then my father shouting at the television, "God damned liberals!"

I rolled my eyes. Same old happy family.

I could smell that defrosting burrito smell. What was it, exactly? Logic dictated it had to be meat, cheese, tortilla. But it actually smelled like none of those things.

Anyway, I liked it, and my stomach growled as the weird smell filled the kitchen.

I kept thinking about Kisa, there on her bed, reading, how happy she looked. I wanted to look into those eyes, that face, and share that happiness. Hester wandered into the kitchen as I bit into the first burrito, the steaming cheese burning my tongue and pouring down onto my chin. "Ow, ow, ow..." I murmured.

Hester looked at me with disdain and shook her head. "Still trying to figure out how to eat food?"

"Still trying to figure out how to make a friend?"

She rolled her eyes. I saw she had her backpack slung over her shoulder. "For your information, I am going to a friend's house to study."

"Who let the dogs out?" I said, taking another bite of my burrito, the molten meat and cheese burning my tongue. "Ow... ow..." I opened my mouth wide to show my sister all the chewed glory of my burrito.

She just sighed and turned away. As soon as I heard her car pulling out, I grabbed the second burrito, munching on it as I moved stealthily upstairs. Pale blue cathode rays flickered from beneath the door to my little brother's room and I tiptoed past, wanting to make sure he didn't hear me. The little turd was the first one who would run and tell my sister I had snuck into her room.

I pushed her door open a crack, slipped in. Right away, I was struck by the nerdy orderliness of it all--the perfectly made bed, the quilt even turned down like at a hotel, and the smell--like flowers. One whole wall consisted of bookshelves my father had installed, since my sister had been book crazy since even before she learned to read. The shelves were actually not bad. He'd built them back when he actually seemed to care. But good or bad, they were stuffed with books in rows, and on top of those rows of books even more books lay sideways, jammed into every little space, because the shelves had become too full, and I saw Hester had even piled books on the floor in front of the shelves, but all in neat pyramids, bigger books on the bottom of the stack, smaller ones at the top.

Did she actually read all these? I shook my head in amazement.

I started skimming the spines, looking for Blood Wolf Academy. I heard a door slam, and running to the window, I glanced out. What the hell? She was back? Why?

I started looking, looking, and then I noticed something-- the books. She'd organized them all by author's last name, as if this were some kind of crazy library. God, my sister was a dork. The poster in Kisa's room came back to

me. Jillian J. Orlando. That was the author's name. I ran my finger along the spines of the books, Orlando. I grabbed the book, shoved the last of my burrito into my mouth and snuck back out, closing the door, and hurried down the hall to my room, slipping in just as I heard her coming up the stairs.

Safely inside my room, I triumphantly leapt onto my bed, looking at the book. Blood Wolf Academy, it read in red letters. On the cover was the image of an old, spooky looking house, framed by two big trees, their branches dripping in that kind of weird stuff you see on trees in the south. I opened the book and--shoved it under my covers as the door to my room slammed open.

"Why were you in my room?" Hester spat, standing there with her legs spread.

"I wasn't--"

"Don't lie! My whole room smells like one of your disgusting burritos!"

Oh, crap. Well, I have always believed in sticking with the lie. "It must have just kind of, what's the word... passed through the wall..."

"Ugh! STAY OUT OF MY ROOM!"

And she slammed the door and stomped down the hall.

Whatever, I thought, relieved she hadn't caught me with her precious book. I read the opening line:

My parents finally managed to force me into being the girl they wanted. All it took was murder.

Two caskets, gleaming black in the slowly falling rain, each one smothered with red roses. The sound of the raindrops tapping against my umbrella, my little sister, Gretchen, clinging to my leg, her body shaking with sobs as she buried her head in my hip. My Uncle Gus standing nearby, whispering, "You don't have to watch this."

But I did. I did have to watch as the rest of the mourners turned away, shuffling back to their cars, their lives, their fading memories. I had to watch as the men from the cemetery, dressed in black suits and white shirts, turned the hoist and lowered the bodies of my parents into the cold, wet Earth.

"Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad," I whispered, as the men began to shovel dark, wet dirt over their coffins, the shovel blades flashing. All I had ever wanted was a normal life. I just wanted to be a regular girl. Go to the movies. Have a boyfriend. Play soccer, go to college. But now I finally realized I would never have any of that. I couldn't.

I rubbed my little sister's head and pulled her close. "Don't worry," I said to her. "I am going to find the people who did this, and I am going to kill them."

She looked up at me through her tears, her eyes red and burning with hate, and she said, "Good."

My Uncle met my eyes, and he smiled, nodding his approval.

No. I would not choose a normal life. I knew that now. I was finally going to give in. After all the pressure, all the pushing, my parents had finally won. I would be the daughter they wanted me to be. They were gone now, but they controlled my life more than ever.

I would claim my birthright. I would attend Blood Wolf Academy. And there, I would learn to kill without mercy.

Like a Blood Wolf born and true.

As I turned away, I said goodbye not just to my parents, but to Dani Fang, the carefree girl who just wanted to move to Paris and become an artist. I wasn't her anymore, and now I wondered if I ever really had been.

I read on, losing track of time. Like with the music, it filled in gaps in my psyche, spaces that had opened, and I hungrily devoured every page. She arrived at Blood Wolf Academy and met Gruffin:

I was at my locker, placing my Lycanthropy for Beginners text book on the shelf and pulling out On Fighting Vampires, when I felt someone bump into me, knocking the book from my hand. I turned, meaning to tell whoever it was off, and found myself staring right at a bulging, rock hard chest with curly black hair sticking out the open collar. I looked up, and up, past his square jaw, scruffy black hair, and into the biggest pair of emerald green eyes I had ever seen. "You..." I said, clenching my fists, but even as I started to tell him off, my nose filled with his musky smell, and I felt my heart flutter as I stared into his eyes.

"Yes?" he said. Oh my god. His voice was deep and velvety--like fudge for my ears.

"Um... you.... I...." I felt myself blushing as I struggled to find the words.

He raised his arms and put them on my locker, caging me in, then leaned in until our noses were almost touching. He chuckled. "You're cute," he said. "Kanada."

"Um...." He knew my name? For some reason, it made my heart flutter, and I blushed.

"I was worried you might be a threat, but no." He actually had the audacity to take me by the chin, running his rough fingers along my jawline. I couldn't understand why I just stood there, stuttering and blushing.

"I'm the alpha around here," he said. "Be nice, and I'll make you one of my pack mates."

That did it. I yanked my chin free from him, put my hands on his chest and shoved. He let me push him back, laughing, a big grin spreading across his face. I felt something in me tighten at the sight of his smile, those big, white teeth, his plush, red lips. "So, you do have some fire."

"Don't talk down to me," I said, finding my voice. "I am the daughter of a pack leader, and I'll make you my mate."

Some of the other kids had gathered around us for the show. Some laughed. Some cheered.

Gruffin gave me a once over, mentally undressing me with his eyes. My skin crawled even as I blushed, and I felt a confused mix of emotions as he

held me in his gaze. "I'm going to enjoy breaking you," he said. "Puppy." Then he turned and swaggered away.

I stared at him, my emotions a tangle of hate and something I didn't want to admit to.

"He likes you," Breanna said, rushing up to me and grabbing my arm.

"He's a jerk," I said, shaking my head, watching him vanish into the crowd of students.

"Yeah. A really hot jerk. I would love to join his brood."

"Gross. I wouldn't," I spat.

Breanna just laughed. "Methinks you doth protest too much."

"I have to get to class." I got my books and marched off, my head held high, but as I sat down and listened to Mr. Fangering lecture about how to fight vampires in groups, I kept thinking of Gruffin's hand on my chin, and his scent, and I crossed my arms and sighed, because I knew I was crushing on him and I hated it.

I fell asleep reading, and that night I dreamt of werewolves, and Kisa, and me.

Chapter 10

In the morning, I ached to just fake sick and stay in bed all day reading, but knew I couldn't. First, my parents were tyrants, and unless I had a 150 degree fever and was a breath away from death, they would insist I go to school. "Ninety percent of life is showing up!" My dad would say, "and the other ten percent is a good handshake!"

Der.

The other reason I pulled myself away from my bed and my book revolved around the fact that I knew this wasn't me. This was Kisa, and it scared me that we had become so intertwined, that something that so much wasn't me, now was me.

A thought drifted into my consciousness: the word identity meant "the condition of being one thing and not another." It came from a Latin root *Ident* which meant "repeatedly" or "again and again."

To the Romans, you were what you did. Your identity was defined not by some special inner you, but by the actions you performed, your habits. If you got up every day, went to your forge and hammered out swords, your identity was blacksmith. If you had kids and got up every day and mothered them, you were a mother.

So, what did it mean if I got up every day and did Kisa? If I listened to her music, read her books? Was I becoming Kisa, and not me? Or, some different person altogether?

And what would my bros on the football team think of me if they caught me reading this chick lit? Should it matter?

So, I got up and went to school, and I fought the urge to slip the book into my backpack so I could sneak a read in between classes. Because I needed to do Dylan, even if he was feeling more and more like an act.

I know some kids think about this stuff, but I'd never been one of them. Since as long as I can remember I'd been all about sports, video games, hanging out with the dudes. About the only thing I can remember changing was when I started to notice that girls were girls, but even that wasn't some big emotional crisis. It was just a regular thing.

But now I felt like I was a different person every day, and I didn't know what I liked or didn't, or who I was or wanted to be, and it was weird, and I felt off, unbalanced, and I didn't know if that was good or bad.

My head felt cloudy all day. I hadn't slept well. I found it hard to concentrate. I'd really gotten onto the book, and all day I kept thinking about the story, wondering what was going to happen.

As I walked down the hall with Cassie on the way to lunch, I saw two petite Asian girls walking toward us. I'd never seen them before. They were both really pretty, and I made a special point of not looking at them in any obvious way, because Cassie was always very sensitive to that, and I totally understood. I didn't want her ogling guys when we were together.

But then she squeezed my arm and said, "Who are they?"

"Who?"

"Those Asian girls?"

"I didn't notice."

"It's okay. I know you saw them, and yes, they are cute, but I never saw them before. Did you?"

"They must be new," I said.

At lunch, I noticed the two girls had been joined by a boy. He was tall, lean and muscular. I wondered if he played football. They sat close together, talking, and they kept glancing across the room at Kisa and her brothers, who in turn murmured together and looked at them. The looks on their faces, the body language, it suggested tension there-- some threat from the new kids. But how could they know each other? Had they all transferred here from the same school?

"Earth to Dylan. Earth to Dylan."

I turned to Cassie and smiled, taking her chin in my hand, rubbing my fingers along her jawline. "You are gorgeous," I said, staring into her eyes.

Her face brightened. "Dylan?"

"Let's go meet the new kids," I suggested. "Welcome them to the school."

"Really?" She tilted her head to the side. She knew I wasn't a very outgoing person, usually.

"Yeah. I want to see if the dude plays football or not."

"Of course," she said. "Okay. Why not?"

I took her hand and we walked over. The three new kids sized us up, looking curious more than anything else. "Hey," I said, putting my arm around Cassie. "I'm Dylan and this is Cassie." Cassie made a little wave at my side. "Welcome to the school."

The guy nodded. "I'm Victor," he said, "and this is Dasha and Syria. My sisters." He must have seen the look on my face, and he just laughed. "You were expecting what? Xi Pang?"

"Dude," I said, "I'm so not that guy. But I will admit I wasn't expecting Victor."

We all laughed. Cassie split off and started talking to the girls, while I shook hands with Victor. "You play ball?" I said. "You have the build for it."

"I played some tight end at my old school," he said, flexing his arm. "But then I blew out my knee."

"Ow. I'm a QB. So, what was your old school, anyway?" I glanced at Kisa out of the corner of my eye. She and her brothers were watching us intently, their eyes hard.

"Oh, it was out west. You wouldn't have heard of it."

"Try me."

Just then the bell rang. "Shoot. Gotta get to class. I'll catch up with you later, bro."

The girls all hugged and made their goodbyes and the group walked off. "They seem so nice," Cassie said.

"Yeah. Victor seemed all right," I answered as we made our way toward the exit. I glanced back and Kisa and her brothers were staring daggers at us. What the hell? I wondered, annoyed I hadn't been able to get more out of Victor.

"Victor?" Cassie said.

"Yeah, but he's American born and raised, so it's--well, still a little odd."

"His sisters are named Dasha and Syria. The names all sound--Russian or something."

Just like Kisa, I thought. "I guess," I said.

"Well, anyway, I'm glad we said 'hi.' It can be hard to be the new kids in school."

"I know, right?"

I drifted through football practice, mostly thinking about Blood Wolf Academy. I couldn't wait to get home and read some more. But, when I got done showering, fist bumped some bros and grabbed my stuff, heading out the door, I ran right into one of the two new girls, bumping into her,

knocking her off balance. It looked like she might fall, and I instinctively grabbed her arm and pulled her to me. She made a small, shocked noise and grabbed onto me, wrapping her arms around me. I felt her soft little body against mine, got a whiff of some kind of cinnamon scent. She looked up at me, strands of her black hair falling across her big, brown eyes, eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Sorry," she blurted. "I was reading--I didn't see you."

"Totally my fault," I said, giving her arm a squeeze. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she said, staring up at me. I stared back, looking down into those big eyes, feeling like I was being drawn into them, sinking into them....

"Um... you..." I was at a loss for words. I felt her squeeze my arm back.

I felt dizzy, like the world was starting to spin, like I was about to fall, and then suddenly the image of Kisa appeared in my mind--Kisa with harsh, angry eyes, and she said, "No, you don't!"

I put my hands on the girl's shoulders, suddenly aware that our hug had gone on a little too long for a guy and a girl who weren't dating. "I'm so sorry," I said, stepping away. A flash of what looked like rage popped into her eyes, and I saw her book on the ground, open, pages against the pavement. I grabbed it and handed it to her, getting a glimpse of the cover--two vampires standing back to back, bloody fangs bared. They were dressed like cowboys and held smoking revolvers in their hands. The title read *Duel at High Moon*.

"Vampire fan?" I said.

The rage vanished from her eyes and she looked down, cheeks blushing.
"Oh my god. It's so lame, right?"

"I'm more into werewolves," I said, without thinking, immediately embarrassed I'd let it slip, but she laughed.

"Funny."

I could feel that tension, the sparks between us. It was just like I felt with Kisa, only we'd never hugged. "I better get going," I said, turning and walking away. "Sorry again." I'd met her, but I couldn't remember her name, which I didn't want her to realize.

"Wait!" she called.

When I looked back, she was standing in this super cute way, with her knees together, her feet turned inward, one finger to her lips while with her other hand she twisted the tie from her hoodie. I felt myself getting horny and I groaned, wanting to get away, feeling like even my feelings now amounted to cheating on Kisa-- Cassie, but I answered. "What?"

"What's your name? Mine's Dasha."

Dasha. I felt light-headed when I heard her name. What the hell is wrong with me? I wondered as I blurted out, "Dylan."

"Dylan?" She scrunched up her nose, and I immediately wanted to kiss it.

Kisa appeared to me mentally again, and she said, "Go! Now!"

"I gotta go," I said, hurrying away.

"I'll see you tomorrow!" Dasha called after me.

I headed straight home, my head swimming with confusing thoughts, the images of Kisa and Dasha swirling in my mind, my whole body flushed. I thought of their faces, how much I wanted to kiss them, the feeling of Dasha in my arms, her body pressed against mine.

Cassie and football. Cassie and football. Cassie and football.

Blood Wolf Academy.

I headed straight to my room, kicked my shoes off, threw myself onto my bed. Why is this happening to me? I wondered, feeling like I was going crazy with all the confusing emotions flowing through my mind.

It sucked!

I needed something to take my mind off it all--and so I grabbed Blood Wolf Academy, feeling a rush of relief as I turned my attention to the story, eager to see what was going on with Kanada and her little sister. Plus, of course, Gruffin.

I will hate it so much if she falls for him, I thought as I started to read. He is such a jerk!

I had stopped feeling my body. The sun had just started to rise, and I'd been running since 5 am. I knew I couldn't match Gruffin in terms of strength, so I was determined to be more fit, have greater endurance. I would win the Faustorium, and I would make him my packmate.

I came to The Hill--a steep and endless climb that would mark the end of my run. For a second, the thought "NO" flashed through my mind, and my pace slowed as I started to rise along the sloping earth, my thighs and calves burning, but then I thought-- YES, and I cleared my mind and focused on just running, running, running from one step to the next...

I heard the crunch of gravel behind me, getting closer. I didn't look back, but my skin crawled. No, I thought. No. And right then I felt a hand slap me on the butt--hard.

"Hey, Puppy," Gruffin shouted as he ran past me, then turned and ran backwards. "You run hard--for a little girl!" He turned and ran up, up, away. I pumped my legs, running as hard as I could, furious, but he just ran and ran getting further and further ahead until he disappeared around a tree-crowded bend near the top of the path.

I kept running, all the way to the top, finally stopping when I passed the huge, twisty oak that marked the end of my run. I bent over, hands on my knees, gasping for breath. I should have felt triumphant, but I only felt sick and angry, the spot on my butt where he'd slapped me still burning. There's no way, I thought. No way he ran as much as I did today. He was probably just starting out--fresh. And yet his hard, muscled shoulders had glistened with sweat as he'd run backwards, looking back at me, laughing.

If he won, it might be impossible for me to stop it--the submission. I would start to change, to accept Gruffin as my alpha. I would become just another

girl in his pack, eagerly following him around, giggling at all his stupid jokes, desperate for a smile, a wink, anything to validate my worth to him.

I stood and despite my burning lungs, shouted angrily at the sky, a raw, animal roar. Then, I leaned against that old oak, the rough bark against my arm hurt, and it felt good. Never... never... never... I would not submit to Gruffin. He would submit to me.

I didn't know how, but I knew that I had to beat him, and I would.

I fell asleep reading, drifting off to a strange dream, a dream that felt so wrong. I was in the woods, running, a full moon high and bright in the sky. I could hear something crashing through the woods behind me, and my heart raced with fear. Ducking branches, hopping over logs, I glanced back, my long hair streaming across my face, and I saw them--a pair of cold yellow eyes, and then behind the eyes, a huge gray wolf with a mouth full of jagged white fangs, and fat, red tongue lolling from its mouth...

I screamed! It wanted me... I had to get away... I ran blindly, panicked... I ran into the night, consumed with terror...

Chapter 11

"Ah!" My shout woke me. I sat up, swearing, dream bleary, my room mysterious and strange with night shadows. The moon hovered outside my window--not the full moon of my dream, but a crescent moon, still bright, one ragged cloud drifting across its surface. I reached to brush the long hair back off my shoulders and--

Nothing. I didn't have long hair. Weird.

Needing to pee, I got up and went down the hall to the bathroom I shared with my brother and sister. Pulling down my pants, I sat down on the cold seat, squirming, and relieved myself, only half conscious as I grabbed some toilet paper and rolled it up, getting ready to wipe myself--

What the hell?

I felt myself flush with embarrassment. Why the hell was I sitting down to pee?

I shook my head and headed back to my room. I felt odd. A strange pulling, a draw, and the strange impulse I'd had to brush my long hair back, long hair I didn't have. What?

The image of Dasha smiling up at me, her bright eyes sparkling, filled my imagination. Dasha. I walked to my window and sat on the sill, putting my fingers to the cool glass. The leaves on the tree were all red and brown and yellow, flaring to death in the cool and dark of Fall. Looking at them made me feel happy and sad at the same time, and I wondered where Dasha was, what she was doing. I wished she were here so I could hold her, just hold her. I needed to be close to her, to feel her heart beating against mine.

The leaves began to blur, and, touching my cheek, I realized I'd been crying.

Oh, shit, I thought, wiping the tears away, feeling disgusted. I'm a guy. I don't cry. I know. I know. It's the 21st Century and stereotypes are bad and all that-- but guys don't cry, especially just because something stupid like the leaves turning brown. My dad would punch me so hard if he saw me like this.

I climbed under my quilt and pulled my pillow to me, drifting off to a thankfully dreamless sleep.

In the morning, I struggled to get moving, stumbling out of bed, throwing on some clothes, grabbing my stuff, a box of grape pop tarts and a can of Rock Star, heading out to my truck, munching the pop tarts down as I drove, the crumbs piling up on my sweatshirt and lap. I parked toward the end of the row, and then jumped out of my skin as someone slapped their hands against my driver side window and shouted "Hey!"

I turned to see Dasha smiling at me, trying not to laugh.

"What the hell?" I said.

"Scaredy cat!" she said.

"Vampire Nerd," I said, grabbing my bag and climbing out of the truck. As I stood, Pop Tart crumbs tumbled to the ground. I felt like a total dork. "Oh, no," I said, looking down at all the pop tart rubble piled at my feet.

"Omigod," Dasha said. "You're like a homeless man." She brushed her hands down my chest, clearing more crumbs.

I liked the feeling of her hands brushing against me, and eager to save some face, I said, "I think you missed a couple," pointing back to my chest. "Maybe you should do that again, but slower. Much slower."

"Ha ha," she said. "Nice try. Walk to class with me?"

She was so bright and full of life and--attitude. I felt that warm fuzzy confused feeling again, but--well, Cassie. My life was already too complicated. I really didn't want another girl in my life.

"I gotta meet my girlfriend," I said, though I so badly wanted to hang out with Dasha, to stare into those eyes.

'Oh, come on," she said. "I'm not asking you out on a date or anything." She grabbed the strap of my backpack and started to pull me towards the school.

I let her, stumbling along for a few steps, but then I stopped short, planting my feet. Her arm jerked stiff and she did this kind of kick as she was yanked backwards. "I really can't," I said.

"Oh," she said. "Okay." She stepped close, and I could smell that cinnamon perfume again, and I realized she smelled like a Pop Tart. "I hope Cassie knows what a lucky girl she is to have you," she said with a big smile, and then turned and walked away, giving her hips a shake and glancing back over her shoulder at me, winking.

Yikes.

I shook my hand, thinking, Oh hell. I went off to find Cassie. I really needed to see her, hug her, but I really mainly wanted to make myself feel less guilty, but all my confusion about Cassie came back, stronger than ever. I'd recommitted to her, been a better boyfriend, but even that I'd done because

I needed something from her, the feeling of being grounded, normal, the regular guy I used to be.

Selfish. My whole relationship was nothing but selfish.

Which was more wrong? Keeping going on with this until Cassie finally figured out it wasn't working, or breaking it off now so at least she could probably find someone to go to the Halloween thing with her? I wished I had someone to ask for advice. My parents? Please. They barely talked, and when they did it was always like a business meeting. They would tell me something like--make a list of the pros and cons--but nothing about real, actual feelings like people have.

I couldn't remember if I'd ever even seen them hug.

Who else? My sister? No. I couldn't let her see me like this. I had to handle this, I decided. On my own.

I walked to our usual spot. I saw Cassie, and she turned and saw me coming. Our eyes met, and the brightest, happiest smile spread across her face. Seeing her seeing me, looking so happy, it made me feel like crying again, but I swallowed, plastered a smile on my own face, and went over to give her a hug. For that moment, it felt like things were back to normal, like I was back to normal, and maybe my life could just go back to safe, boring and lame.

But, no. As the day progressed, weird happened. After my fourth hour World History AP class, I was daydreaming about Kisa, and almost walked into the girl's bathroom. I stopped myself just in time, turning away. Two freshman girls looked up at me, giggling.

I drifted through the day, thinking about Kisa, then Dasha, then Kisa again. Dasha was in my AP Lit class, and she sat about four seats up and two rows over from me. She looked back at me a couple times, making eyes, and I couldn't help but grin back. I'm a person, and it felt good to have a girl so into me.

Mrs. Hollier caught her and yelled at her to pay attention, and she didn't look back again, but I found myself looking at her bare shoulder--she'd let her hoodie slip off her shoulders and was wearing a tank top underneath, her yellow bra strap bright against her smooth skin. I couldn't stop staring at the smooth, round little shoulder of hers, that bra strap, the clip or whatever that adjusted the link of the strap. I found those things so hot for some reason.... She kind of shrugged as we took turns reading from *The Crucible*, and the bra strap slipped down off her shoulder, dangling against her slender little forearm, and I inwardly groaned at how insanely hot she looked with her bra strap off her shoulder like that. I noticed for the first time that she had a tattoo on her shoulder much like Kisa's--a twisting geometric pattern of loops.

And then it happened. Barely thinking, I slipped my hand into the collar of my shirt and started kind of searching around with my thumb, trying to find my bra strap so I could pull it back up. I stared down at a book, my bangs brushing across the top of my vision, and I glanced down to see smooth, hairless round legs as I kept idly trying to pull up my bra strap, and then I suddenly realized how weird everything was, and I looked back over my shoulder and saw- me- smirking back at me.

"Dasha," Mrs. Hollier said. "You can stare at cute guys after class."

I was staring back at me, becoming aware of the feel of my body, the wrongness of it, the femaleness of it.

"Dasha!" Mrs. Hollier said, and she was now standing right next to me.

I jumped, startled to realize she was talking to me, and looking up I said, "Sorry." At the sound of my voice--of that girl's voice coming from my mouth, the world twisted, and I found myself back in me, looking at Mrs. Hollier and Dasha, and I shook my head and closed my eyes, because it was too crazy weird.

Was Dasha one of them? A Vaguerant?

Why did this keep happening to me?

I now had experienced multiple incidents where I found myself in a girl's body, or acting like a girl, or getting obsessed with stuff a girl I knew liked. It scared me, and I told myself it had to stop.

It had to stop it because it wasn't--it wasn't normal. I was a regular guy, and I tried my best not to be prejudiced, but you know what? I really was glad I was normal, just one of the kids, and not someone who was--different. I had always just been a regular bro, and I had never been weird, but--

But maybe I was?

My mom had read a book a while back called *The Secret*, and she couldn't stop talking about manifesting, how whatever happened to us was something we had brought into our lives. Our thoughts become our reality.

Had I brought this on myself? Hadn't I been kind of curious about girls, about their lives? Had I been a little jealous of my sister sometimes? Hadn't

I actually liked some Taylor Swift songs but pretended I didn't because I knew dudes weren't supposed to?

Hadn't I always been pretending to be the person I thought I was supposed to be, at least a little? Why should certain songs be girl songs, or dude songs? L7 was more butch sleeping than Coldplay on Viagra would ever be.

I almost ditched weight class, but it was pretty much not an option for me as a member of the football team. I was really worried about seeing Kisa, for every possible reason. One, that she might know I was the guy who'd been creeping around her house and peeking into her window--it wasn't like that, but it was that. And then the whole thing with Dasha, and the fact that Kisa had seemed to be there, and she'd seemed really mad, and I didn't know what was going on anymore, and who I could trust and, anyway, she wasn't there, again, and I didn't know if I was relieved because I wouldn't have to deal with all these feelings or mad because I needed to ask her some questions like--why me? Why is this happening to me?

I kept my mind on practice, running the scout team, really focused, playing well. I snuck out the side door to the locker room after, hurrying to my car, just glancing at the front entrance to see that--sure enough-- Dasha stood there with her books, waiting under a big oak tree, red and brown leaves scattered at her feet like a scene from a K-drama-- wait, why did I think that? I didn't even know what K-drama was, except I suddenly did.

CHAPTER 12

I got in my car, drove home, headed to my room. Blood Wolf Academy II sat there on my bed, face down, and at the first sight of the cover-- Kanada and Gruffin entwined, each clutching a sword behind their back--my heart skipped a beat, and I felt so excited to sit down and read some more--

But no. I picked up the book and tossed it into the corner of my room along with a pair of jeans, some socks, dirty underwear and a little league cap that read Markus Glass. I turned on my flat screen and fired up my Xbox. Dude time, I thought, settling in to a game of Madden football. Time to bro it up. No more reading chick lit.

I played the Cleveland Browns. Seeing the name I thought cleve... I wonder why it's named Cleveland? Is that like cleave, as in to cut? You're being so Kisa, I thought sourly. Stop it, and I turned my attention back to my game. A thought crossed my mind; how come you aren't allowed to create custom players who are girls, and I wiped that Kisa thought away with a girls don't play football, which my inner Kisa countered by reminding me that Football Player Homecoming Queen had become trendy to the point of being ordinary.

"Shut up," I murmured, and when I finally could get lost in the world of the game, my mind quieted as I focused entirely on calling and running my plays.

I'd just tossed my third touchdown pass to Josh Gordon when I heard the doorbell ring--a sound which I duly ignored-- as I was a dude and did not do door answering.

The Austin Desperados kicked off, and my team smothered their return man at the 12-yard line. The doorbell rang again. "Is someone going to get that?" I heard my sister yell from somewhere in the house.

"Yeah!" I shouted. "You."

"Why should I?"

"Don't, then," I said, knowing my sister had something in her that compelled her to answer the door whenever no one else did.

"You're a jerk!" she yelled. "I hate you!"

"I'll get it," Carney--remember my brother, Carney? That's okay. No one else does, either. Ever the peace maker, he'd finally ripped his eyes away from whatever endless MUG or Morp or whatever he'd gotten lost in. I smirked, and then jumped up screaming, "NO! NO! NO!"

I'd sent an all-out blitz, and the Desperados QB had completed a short pass to a receiver who, slipping one tackle, had then run 80 yards for a touchdown. If you don't know football, I'll say it this way--something bad happened, and, of course, it was all Jabrill Pepper's fault, not mine.

I barely resisted the urge to hurl my controller against the wall, but paced around, trying to calm myself.

I get into my games.

I jumped at the sound of someone knocking at my door.

"What?" I said, nervous. "Who?" Dasha, I thought. She followed me home. I remember that moment when I'd felt I was her, and I shook my head.

"Who is it?"

"It's me," I heard a girl say, and then the door swung open. "We need to talk."

But it wasn't Dasha. Kisa stood there, hands on her hips, and she looked pissed.

"What the--?"

She stormed into my room, closing the door behind her, then walked right up to me and pushed me back saying, "Sit." I found myself sitting on my bed. Her eyes burned with anger, but she also seemed tense, like a hidden danger crouched in my closet, waiting to attack. She walked over to the window and glanced out suspiciously, as if looking for someone. She wore a black hoodie and black jeans, similar to the outfit I'd worn the night I'd not stalked her but kinda stalked her. Her hair tumbled out from under a black knit cap. "You have no idea how much danger you are in," she said as she looked out the window.

"Danger?" I said, surprised and unnerved. Then, I thought about her brothers. "Look, if this is about, you know, that thing or whatever, and your brothers are looking to start something--"

"My brothers?" She snorted, turning toward me, crossing her arms. "My brothers are here to protect you. So am I."

I laughed, thinking she was putting me on, or maybe she was some kind of psycho chick, but mostly seeing her here in my room, eyes full of fire, I felt myself kind of more in love with her than ever. "What are you talking about?"

She tossed her hair, and saw Blood Wolf Academy II in the corner.

"See? THAT!" She said. "That has to stop. They are after you, and you have no idea about anything. You have to fight it!"

"How? And I asked you before. Why me? Why do I find myself with your stuff in my brain? I tried to fight it, but it's hard because I can't stop thinking about you. I like you."

Kisa closed her eyes. Took a deep breath. "You don't like me," she said. "You want to be me."

I laughed out loud to hide my panic. "That's just--you're nuts. And don't tell me you aren't into me. I can see it in your eyes."

"It's not the way you think. I don't want you; I want to be you, too. Hold on. Okay. I need to calm myself down, explain this all to you. I'm sorry. I just get all-- urrrrr--sometimes."

"Okay," I said. "Let's calm down. Want to sit down?"

She shook her head, and instead sat in my desk chair well out of arm's reach. I started to move closer, but she held up her hands and shook her head, NO. "Just stay there. It's safer."

"Safer from what?"

She covered her face and said, "What I am about to tell you will sound crazy. You won't believe it, but you really need to."

I nodded. "Try me." But I was looking into her eyes, at her pretty face, thinking about how much I wanted to kiss her.

"You're one of us."

The room seemed to grow darker, and the wind whipped outside, moaning, rattling my window.

"One of-- a Vaguerant?" The thought hit me hard, and I revolted against it, but at the same time it felt true, right, like something I had known all along. But that would mean I wasn't normal, that I had never been normal.

"Do you believe me?"

"No. It's bullshit," I said. It isn't true. Can't be true.

"It's not bullshit, Dylan. You have to believe me. I think you do believe me."

"You said it was because you were crushing on me."

"It is, and that was a partial truth."

"A nice phrase for a lie."

"It's because we started crushing on each other. I lose control when I crush on a guy, and we become each other. You're the same way, and that's why the pull is so strong. Our kind are drawn to each other, and you have even less control than I do."

I shook my head. "I have a girlfriend, and I never turned into her."

"Then you never really crushed on her. Not like you feel about me."

"I did," I said, and I didn't sound convincing even to myself. I'd picked her because she was a cheerleader, and popular, and because I wanted other guys to be jealous. I'd never felt crazy about her like I did now about Kisa.

"You're a terrible liar."

"Why tell me all this now?" I said, "What changed all of a sudden?"

"Dasha," Kisa said. "Dasha wants to steal your body."

"What?"

"You were her today. For a second."

"No," I lied. "I barely know her."

"She's a VG, too, only she works for the Russian Government. She's here to steal your body and force you to become a member of the Unknown Legion."

"I kind of thought Dasha was, but Russia?"

"They want to steal your body. Dasha would become you, and you her. Do you want to be a helpless, little teenage girl?"

"Hold on," I said, remembering countless lectures and talks on equality at my school, plus a head full of feminist pedagogy and all my love for the powerful women of girl punk. "The helpless teenage girl is the creation of a patriarchal system of--"

"Oh, shut up. Do you want to lose your body?"

"No. So, if I am one of you, why have I never swapped with anyone?"

"It takes training or real passion. Like for you it might not have happened until you really fell in love."

"So, can you show me how? Teach me?"

"It takes time, and, anyway, this isn't the time." She stared at me, then spat out, "Dude, I might not be able to switch us back--not right away. I haven't learned to control my powers. That's why I've been trying to avoid you so much. If we switch now, I don't know how long you would have to stay as me."

"Okay. Fine," I said, wanting to call her bluff. Looking at her, with her little arms and curvy body, I did not want to spend time as her, and for a

moment I felt a flash of fear as her eyes seemed to gleam with amusement at the idea, and I thought she might really do it. "And if I'm stuck, I'm stuck."

"You sure?" she said, smirking. "Because, well, I am on the rag."

"Oh! Gross!" I backed away, holding my hands up. "Then, no," I said. Just the word 'period' in that context freaked me out. I always felt disgusted just at the sight of one of sister's tampons, or even the box.

Kisa stepped forward, smirking. "No, you should know what girls go through. Let's switch."

"No!" I rolled back over my bed and put it between us.

She nodded. "Please. Trust me. I wouldn't tell any guy about my period--"

"Stop talking about it, and just--go."

She laughed. "Guys. Wow. But, listen, I do need to protect you or else you are going to end up Dasha, and you are not going to like the way they will train you as a female."

"I'll stay away from her," I said. "Fine."

"And stay away from me, too. I can't tell you how close we are to a long term involuntary swap."

"Okay. Okay. Just--thanks and all that--but now go."

Kisa looked at me skeptically, then turned and grabbed the handle of my door. My eyes dropped to her cute little butt. Pausing, she looked back over her shoulder and said, "They will break you, Dylan. It will be ugly, and it will leave permanent scars."

I nodded. "Got it. Forgive me if I don't show you out."

She left. I sat on my bed, shaking my head. Me? A body swapper? The Russians?

I felt like I'd somehow landed in some kind of Netflix series, and I really didn't like it. I crossed my arms over my chest, hugging myself, but the feeling left me disappointed, cold, like something was missing, and then I realized what it was, and pulled my pillow over my face, covering my eyes, trying to ignore the newly odd feeling of my flat chest, and I ran football plays through my mind until I felt like myself again and not a self-conscious late bloomer.

Chapter 13

I woke, my sheets soaked with sweat, my head clouded with nightmare fragments--me, running through the ruins of an ancient monastery, pursued by a pair of shadowy figures... moonlight cutting through the gothic window frames, stained glass in shards along the stone pavement, cracking sounds beneath my feet as I ran across the glass... an owl hooting in the distance.

The shadowy figures were getting closer and closer, and I heard them laughing, giggling... the soft voices of girls. "He's mine," one said, and the other, "I saw him first!"

I was running in the forest again, holding up the skirts of my dress, looking back... my heart racing...

I lay on my side on a canopy bed, my long hair hanging over my shoulder in a shower of glistening black, and I was looking at me, standing there smiling down at me... but I was Dasha now...

I blinked awake, panting, then rolled out of bed. In the bathroom I splashed water into my face, trying to chase those disturbing fragments from my mind, trying to remember who I was, or had been before all this.

Brushing my teeth, I looked at my face--bags under my glassy eyes. I looked terrible. I put some product in my palm, rubbed my hands together and smeared it into my hair, getting that perfect bedhead look that I never actually had when I got out of bed. I wish I could cover these bags with some foundation I heard myself think, looking around the bathroom sink for my makeup.

Makeup. I shook my head, haunted by the chaos in my head, the fragmented memories of my dreams, my swaps, my odd conversation with Kisa.

Was there someplace I could go for... something? A shrink, a government agency like the X-Files? But what would I tell them? A couple of girls wanted to steal my body?

Hester?

Maybe I could talk to Hester. She read all these crazy books about vampires and werewolves. I was pretty sure I had seen her reading a book about mind readers.

But, I had been such a d-bag to her, and besides what could she really do, anyway? Maybe I should make a hat out of tinfoil? But even on TV and the movies that never seemed to work.

I went to school wondering what to do, how to take action, to get in control of the situation. All Kisa had told me was to stay away and not think about her or Dasha, but what did I really even know about her?

As I pulled into the school parking lot I saw Dasha sitting on a bench by the parking lot, a book in her lap. She looked up at the sound of my truck, smiled and did her cute little wave. My stomach did a little flip, and at the same time I felt an ache behind my sleep deprived eyes as I thought about all Kisa's warnings. I had plenty of reasons to avoid Dasha, starting with the fact I had a girlfriend, but as I parked and glanced in my rearview mirror, I saw her walking toward me, her book clutched to her chest. I would just tell her to stay away from me, that I wasn't interested. Simple. I opened my door and got out.

"Hi!" she said cheerily as she leaned against my truck, tucking her hair behind her ear.

"Hi, yourself," I said, my determination draining from me. "What a coincidence that you just happened to be here when I drove up."

"It's not a coincidence," Dasha said. "I'm stalking you."

"You- what?"

She burst out laughing, putting her hand to her mouth. "Ha ha ha! You should see your face!"

"You were kidding. Of course. Now I feel like a dope."

"Even if I were stalking you," she said, grinning, raising one of her tiny little arms and flexing her bicep, which was basically nothing, "what could a little female like me do to a big, strong guy like you?"

I liked hearing a girl call me a big, strong guy. I am pretty easy to manipulate. And yet, that big strong guy who only seconds ago was going to tell her to get lost just kind of stepped away, bowing, as the 'I want this girl to like me' part took over.

She held her book toward me. "You should read this."

I took it and looked at the cover. It was the same book from the other day: *Duel at High Moon*. "Don't you want to finish it?"

"I've read it, like, four times!"

"Why do you want me to read it?" I asked, and made the mistake of looking in her eyes. I just got lost in those beautiful eyes, and knew I would read it just because she wanted me to.

"Let's just say," she said, grabbing my belt buckle, "that I think it will change your life."

"Well, here's to change," I said, tucking the book into my backpack. "I gotta go. Thanks for the book."

"No problem," Dasha said. She turned sideways so that as I slipped by, our bodies brushed together.

I shook my head, concentrating to prevent myself getting embarrassed. It took all my willpower to keep from looking back as I walked away, getting one more glimpse of her, but I could feel her watching me... watching me... watching me... as I went looking for Cassie.

Cassie.... Football... hut... hut.... Hut...

That night, as soon as I got home, I pulled *Duel at High Moon* out of my bag. I looked over at *Blood Wolf Academy* for a minute, thinking maybe I should finish it, but I just suddenly felt more interested in Dasha's book. All of Kisa warnings went out of my head as I thought about Dasha's eyes, the feeling of our bodies brushing against each other...

How much harm could it really do to read a stupid book? Besides, I'd never been able to figure out why girls were so into vampires anyway. It seemed kind of perverted, the way they were all so into old, dead dudes.

Duel at High Moon

The saloon doors clattered opened, and I heard the sound of boots stomping across the wooden floor, spurs jangling. I'd been wiping down the bar, and without looking up, I said, "Sorry. Bar's closed."

A silver piece clanged down in front of me, landing on its edge and spinning, spinning, the lantern light flashing as it spun. I slammed my palm down on it. "I said the bar's--" I looked up and the words caught in my throat.

He was - I can't even think of a word to describe it. He was everything: tall, with dark eyes and a cleft chin, broad shouldered, long black hair pouring down from under his black Stetson. His eyes met mine, and lingered there. I couldn't read him at all. I had no sense of what he was thinking, which was odd because I had a knack for reading people; and besides, when most men looked at me the only thought hiding behind their giant foreheads was that they wanted me.

But not this one. He just stared into my eyes, gaze lingering, like he was looking right into me, into my soul. I was frozen, staring back, feeling myself flush and my palms get sweaty. "The bar's closed," he said, and his voice was deep and smooth as maple syrup. "I heard you. Pour me a shot of whiskey."

I put my hand on my hip, and with the other I pushed his silver piece back to him. "The bar's closed."

He covered my hand with his. I didn't see him move, but his hand was just suddenly on mine, giving it a slight squeeze. His skin was cold--cold like marble. I felt scared, though I kept my face blank, and tried to pull away, but he held tight. "I have a gun under the bar," I said evenly. "I'm not afraid to use it."

"I know," he said. "But you won't need to use it. Not on me. I'm not here to hurt you. I came halfway around the world to find you because, Miss Francis, I need your help."

"My help?"

He gave me a tip of his hat. "Indeed. Now, how about that shot of whiskey so we can discuss it?"

"How about letting go of my hand?"

He took his hand off mine, smiling, an arrogant, superior smile. I rubbed my hands together, trying to get warmth back in the one he'd held, which was aching from his frigid grasp. "You're cold like the grave," I said. "I figure you're probably some kind of undead thing."

He smiled, showing me his fangs. "How about that drink, darling?"

"Did you just say you need my help?"

"Yes, I did," he answered. "You are very special."

"Well, then, if you need my help I suggest you come back tomorrow during regular hours because as I said--the bar's closed."

He leaned away from me, and I could see both surprise and respect in his response. "Very well," Miss Francis." He got up and sauntered toward the door.

"If you give up that easy," I called after him. "You need my help more than you realize."

He chuckled and tipped his hat to me once more before swaggering off into the night.

I snorted and grabbed the silver piece he'd left behind, dropping it into my apron pocket. What did a vampire need with my help? I finished wiping down the bar, remembering that cleft in his chin, those eyes, and the cut of that coat as it hung over his broad shoulders.

I couldn't read him, but I felt sure he was one tall, handsome boot full of trouble.

Chapter 14

If I dreamt that night, I didn't remember it. I woke, thinking about my thinking, trying to detect if anything new had dropped into my memory during the night, the previous day, but I couldn't tell. My old new urges all tugged at me--the urge to do my eyes, to jam out to some hard rocking chick band, to obsess about vampires and werewolves.

I felt kind of naked, unprotected, vulnerable when I pulled on my shirt. I missed something. What? The feeling of a strap across my shoulders, across my back...Oh, no. I cringed inwardly as I realized what I was missing: I felt strange now not wearing a bra--which made no sense since I had nothing up top--but I also felt very self-conscious about my flat chest, recalling vague memories of girls making fun of me back in eighth grade.

Great. Just what I needed. A completely foreign and impossible new insecurity which no boy ever had to deal with. The whole thing with girl's wearing bras was such patriarchal bullshit anyway, I thought, and then rolled my eyes. Hi, Kisa. How about getting out of my brain?

Hopefully, I would get used to not wearing a bra again. In the meantime, I just grabbed my keys and headed to school.

Dasha sat on the same bench by the parking lot waiting for me. Shit. I couldn't stop thinking about her, and I wanted to talk to her about High Moon and see that smile, and maybe feel her body against mine, and Kisa's warnings already seemed so distant, like something I'd heard years ago warning me about insane clowns in the woods. I smiled back and climbed out of my truck, pop tart crumbs tumbling to the ground.

"Ugh!" Dasha said, approaching. "You are such-- a boy." She brushed the crumbs off my chest, shaking her head.

Looking down at her smiling face, I wanted to kiss her. I felt like I knew her, had known her, and yet wanted to know her more. Kissing was a good way to really get to know someone. I think she saw it in my eyes, because she kind of stepped into me, putting both hands on my chest, and her eyes got kind of hazy, and she licked her lips.

I felt like I'd been possessed, and any thoughts of Cassie and doing the right thing vanished, and it was just me and Dasha. We were the only two people in the whole world, and I put my hands on her waist and pulled her against me, and she closed her eyes. I leaned down and our lips met--her mouth was soft and wet and hot, and she pushed her tongue into my mouth, and we held that kiss for what seemed like forever.

Finally, desperate for air, I pulled back. Dasha had her hands on my chest, and she said, "I can feel your heart beat."

I covered her hand--the one over my heart, with my own, and I said, "This is wrong."

"Does it feel wrong?" she said.

"No."

She hooked her hands around my neck and pulled me down for another kiss, and I closed my eyes as our mouths met again. I felt her hands on my waist, my small body pressed up against hers, my head tilted back as she pushed her tongue into my mouth, and the wind was tossing my long hair, and my...

I opened my eyes... pulling away from I was looking up at myself, then down at my body, the swell of my chest pushing out the tight hoodie I wore.... I pulled me back, trying desperately to get back into my body, totally freaking out that I'd just kissed a guy, and that guy was me.

And then I was me, again, looking at Dasha, and she was smiling at me as she backed away, then spun and marched off into the mass of kids milling around before school. I noticed Victor kind of crouching behind a car a few spots down, and when he realized I'd spotted him he just stood up and kind of waved. "Bro!" he said, then walked away without waiting for an answer.

Shit. What the hell. Was he watching us? What kind of pervert skulks around watching his sister make-out with guys? "What the hell?" I yelled, but Victor just skulked off. I felt totally creeped out by the whole thing, and

spat on the ground, feeling--I didn't even know what, other than that it wasn't good.

I leaned against my truck for a minute as my head spun, my memories of being Dasha, being kissed as Dasha, at war with my body. I brushed at non-existent long hair, decided I needed to get grounded and started my ritual. Cassie... football... Cassie... football...

I walked off to find Cassie. When I got to her spot about 15 minutes later, her friends were all gathered around her, looking at something. They didn't even see me coming. "What's up?" I asked.

"Asshole!" Cassie spat at the sound of my voice. "You fucking asshole!"

"What?"

"Making out with that new girl?"

"I never made out with anybody," I said, lying without even a thought.

"You are such a liar!" She said. "I can't believe you would do this to me."

"I don't know who said what, but I am not lying," I said. "I would never cheat on you. I love you."

Cassie threw up her hands, shaking her head in disbelief. "Please at least be man enough to admit you're a piece of shit."

"You're being a bitch," I said.

Hearing the "b" word, all the girls around Cassie bristled, and one of them spat, "We saw the video!"

"Video?"

Cassie held up her phone, and I saw a video of Dasha and I kissing. "What the hell?"

"You didn't think about a video, did you?"

Victor. Oh, hell. "Cassie," I heard myself say. "it's not what it looks like." I couldn't seem to stop the lies from pouring out of my mouth.

"Just get the hell out of here," one of her friends said, the others joining in as they moved toward me like a mob, ready to rip me to shreds, all of them shouting. "You jerk!" "Liar!" "Pig!"

I turned and slunk away, feeling like a total loser, sick to my stomach. As much as I had been not in love with Cassie, I thought she was a good person, and I never wanted to hurt her. Seeing her face, the hate and hurt, was like a punch right in my gut, and I felt like I deserved it.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Why did I do it? You don't think sometimes, about the fact that something you are about to do can never be undone, and that it will change things, change your life in very uncool ways. I didn't think. I didn't consider. She was there, Dasha, and she looked pretty, and she smelled good, and I just kissed her because it seemed like it would be fun, and it would only last a moment and it would be no big deal.

And now Cassie hated me, and she was crying, and my junior year of high-school suddenly looked like nothing but a huge steaming pile of manure, and all for a kiss that didn't matter.

Dasha. This was all her fault.

I couldn't wait to see her and tell her off. Damn. I should have listened to Kisa. Dasha turned out to be a sneaky bitch, and had not only screwed things up for me with my girlfriend, but she'd messed up my mind worse than ever with that body swapping kiss of hers. Staying away from her was now the last thing on my mind. I wanted to see her and tell her what a total beyotch she was.

I didn't have to wait long. As I walked out of my first period class, there was Dasha standing across the hall from the door--crying? What the hell?

"Oh my God," she said as soon as I came out the door. "I'm so sorry."

I knew some of the other kids were watching. "Sorry? You set me up."

"I didn't know Victor was watching us," Dasha said. "I never meant to hurt you- or Cassie." The tears poured down her face, and a loud sob escaped her.

I was totally confused. "Then, you shouldn't have-" I was going to say kiss me, but then I remembered myself being the one who leaned down and kissed her. "Been there."

Dasha shook her head. "Please forgive me? I feel so terrible. This is all my fault. It's just that you're so cute, and I've never felt this way about a boy before. I just moved here, and I'm lonely, you know? And you were just so nice, and so..."

Seeing her crying like that, it just made me feel this weird feeling in my stomach, and I felt bad for her, and I couldn't help it, but even with all those kids watching and all the trouble I was already in I gave her a hug. "I'm sorry, too," I said. "I forgive you."

I pulled away. "I gotta get to class."

"You don't hate me, do you? I couldn't stand it if you hated me."

"No," I said, not sure what I felt. "I gotta go. Sorry."

Dasha clung to my hand as I stepped away, letting it gradually slip from hers so our fingertips touched briefly, and for a nanosecond I was her again, looking at me, feeling everything we both felt, and when I turned and hurried away I was struggling not to cry and feeling guilty, angry, sad, and hopeful and if there is a word for that bundle of feelings I wish I knew it, but the only thing I knew for sure was that I had traveled far, far, far into deep space and there were no star charts to guide me home.

Was she lying? Playing some mind games? (ha ha). I didn't know. I played the scene back in my mind, all the scenes, but nothing made sense, and anyway I didn't know if I could even trust my memory anymore. After all, I now enjoyed a traumatic memory of girls hectoring me for having a flat chest, an emotional scar I knew was not real but which felt as real as anything else in my head. I plopped down in English class, and we got back to reading *The Crucible*. The teacher assigned parts, and we sat and read

it together. I wondered sometimes if he taught this way just so he didn't have to do any work but could sit at his desk with that plastic smile plastered on his sagging, wrinkled face.

But as I wondered about memory and truth, I listened to the other kids read *The Crucible*, and I thought about the Salem Witch Trials and how much it was just proof that a good story will beat the truth anytime.

These girls in the story made up a bunch of lies and bullshit, and they sold the whole town on their B.S. People died. Families were destroyed. But I wondered if maybe those girls lied so hard and so well that they came to believe in their own crap. Could we lie ourselves into a new reality?

Our memories are not reliable, even when we aren't weird body swappers who pick up other people's mental DNA. Eyewitness testimony? Half the time, if there is a camera--and these days when isn't there a camera?--it will blatantly contradict the testimony of people who were right there at the scene. They'll say a criminal wore a white shirt and grabbed a bottle, but the video will show the guy wore a black shirt and hit the other guy with a closed fist.

But here's the thing: the witnesses aren't lying. They are sure they remember what happened. They aren't lying, they are just wrong. What they remember happening never happened.

You can't trust your eyes. You can't trust your mind. Half the stuff you remember, the stuff you think is you, could all be a bunch of crap you made up, or read in a book, or dreamt.

You may just have created yourself.

Which led me back to me and wondering if I had somehow brought all this on myself, or created this reality. I remembered that night, the night of the shooting star. I had felt bored with life, and I'd made a wish.

That wish was coming true, but not in any way I'd expected or ever wanted. Did I need a shooting star to make a new wish, to get things back the way they'd been before?

Or could I just stop this all now?

We came to the end of an act. Mr. Wrinkle Face passed out some worksheets that asked us to fill in the blanks answering questions about what we had just read.

He went back to sitting at his desk with that creepy smile on his face. Karen Grant got up to throw something in the trash, and I saw Wrinkle Face's eyes flicker across her butt, which did look great in those jeans.

Creep, I thought, crinkling my nose. And then I filled out the stupid worksheet, glad for something to distract me from things that actually mattered.

CHAPTER 15

At lunch, I knew to steer clear of Cassie's table, but when I went to sit with some of the guys from the football team, they glared at me, shaking their heads. "Bros before hos," I said.

"Man," Jefferson said, "my girlfriend will kill me. Just chill for a few days."

"Thanks," I said bitterly, looking around. When you're just a backup, people turn on you easy. I felt ridiculous standing there holding my tray like some friendless loser, which I guess I'd become.

Dasha and her sister were sitting at a table together, all the other seats empty. Victor was nowhere to be seen. Dasha saw me and waved. Her sister gestured for me to come join them. I glanced at Cassie, who was doing her best to make it seem like she was ignoring me, but I felt pretty sure she was watching me from the corner of her eye.

I felt myself getting pissed. Cassie wanted to turn all my friends against me?

Dasha kept waving.

I looked around the cafeteria and saw no other friendly faces. I make one mistake and all these assholes turn on me like this?

Then I saw Kisa and her brothers. Kisa shook her head--NO. Something about the way she did it reminded me of my mother.

I bristled. What made her think she could boss me around? I shrugged and walked over to join Dasha and her sister.

"You forgive me?" Dasha said eagerly.

"How's this for an answer?" I put my arms around her and pulled her in for a long, lingering kiss, feeling oddly as if we were flickering back and forth

between each other. I didn't care. I was putting on a show, making sure everyone in school knew I didn't care about their judgy selves.

When the kiss ended Dasha squeezed my arm, and I saw Cassie get up and storm out of the cafeteria, once more in tears. This time I felt a small thrill of power and pleasure in her pain. Turn all my friends against me? How do you like me now?

Two of her friends followed her, glancing back at me with eyes slit in disgust. I smirked and shrugged.

I'd never been a bad guy, but more of a blah guy. In that moment, though, I reveled in acting the A-hole. Putting my arm around Dasha, I grabbed a French fry off her plate and tossed it into my mouth, feeling good. Dasha took a tater tot off my plate and started munching on that.

Syria watched us, a bemused smile on her face. "You guys are cute together."

"I'm glad someone thinks so," I said. "Pretty much everyone else hates us."

"Who cares about everyone else?" Dasha said. "We have you."

I felt like a triumphant shit, and the rest of the day I swaggered around giving everyone my hardest 'go fuck yourself' look. The attitude carried over to football practice. I'd felt a little self-conscious taking my shirt off in the locker room, that weird girl thing in my brain about my chest, but I pushed that feeling away and got dressed, and when I left the locker room I wanted

to punish someone, everyone. I was tired of everything, and I wanted to deliver a message to the whole world: stop fucking with me.

I played the scout team quarterback, running plays from our opponent's playbook, giving our defense a chance to see the looks and attacks. I usually had done this well, but today I went out as if it were a live game, and I was there to win. The guys in the huddle felt the energy, and we attacked. I had extra zip on my passes, and the receivers broke tackles and made people miss. I heard some of the guys on defense grumbling, but the coaches loved it, and egged us on.

Finally, when we came to run goal line drills--having four downs to score a touchdown from the five-yard line, Coach shouted: "Losers do hundreds!" That meant if we scored, the starters would have to run the whole 100-yard length of the field and back in full pads.

If that doesn't sound like much, then you're maybe an athlete, but I doubt you've ever run hundreds at the end of a long football practice when your legs were already burning, your clothes were soaked in sweat, and the sun was setting and it had dropped to something like 40 degrees.

Chambers, the leader of the starting defense, pointed at me and said, "You make me run one hundreds I am going to kick your ass."

"Stop me," I said. "Or shut the fuck up."

First down, we ran off tackle and gained only a yard. Not good. Chambers and the guys high fived.

eight yards away--24 feet--and Chambers was about the same distance back, playing a middle zone, taking away the middle of the endzone.

I pump faked and sprinted forward, charging toward the endzone.

Chambers saw it and he charged right at me. We were like two stags, and we lowered our shoulders and clashed when I was about one yard short of the endzone--three feet--I could see the white line against the thick, green grass, just behind Chambers-- as our pads hit there was a loud "WHACK" that echoed through the stadium, and I heard the guys on the sidelines howl, and then the force of my forward momentum sent Chambers falling backwards, and he grabbed at my legs as I ran right over him and into the endzone.

The scout team mobbed me. Chambers pounded his fist against the turf, cursing. The coaches blew their whistles. "Line up. Line up. Time to run. The rest of you guys can hit the locker!"

We all ran to the lockers, hooting it up. I wasn't worried about Chambers. That kind of talk was just guy stuff,--when you competed, you competed. In the end, we were on the same team, but I knew that next time we were out there at practice, he would try and hit me as hard as he could, and that was the way it was. I felt like a guy again, just a straight up bro living the life.

I pulled off my pads, feeling my bra straps pull tight as I raised my arms over my head...

I stopped, shocked. Putting my hands on my chest I felt-- nothing. Just another glitch. I hoped that would be the end of them for now, but they continued as I took a shower. I felt long hair brushing across my shoulders, and then when I was sudsing down my chest for a moment I felt I was

running my hands Dasha's chest. Gasping, embarrassed, I hurried back to the locker, struggling against the urge to wrap a towel around my whole body, the way girls do in movies.

It felt wrong, suddenly, to be in the boy's locker room, and I dressed in a hurry, almost freaking out when one of the guys punched me on the shoulder and said, "Way to hustle."

Guys hit each other. It's just something we do, but it suddenly felt-- threatening somehow. I fist bumped him, trying to hide my skittishness. "Thanks, bro."

Chambers saw me. I raised a fist. "Dude," he said, "I have new respect for you." He opened up for a bro hug, and I had no choice but to hug it out, but as we put out arms around each other I suddenly felt small, and soft, and I slapped him on the back hoping he didn't see me blushing. "You know I'm gonna get you back," he said.

"I wouldn't expect anything less, you bro," I said, struggling to find the words. My voice sounded wrong in my ears.

Feeling flushed and dizzy, I walked out of the locker room, my duffel in hand, and as soon as I walked out the door she was there, waiting.

Shit. Not now.

Kisa. Here? Now? Why?

Kisa planted herself right in front of me. "Hey, Dylan."

"Um, this is really not a great time."

She wore a fuzzy white sweater, one with a plunging neckline, and I could see the top of her black lace bra peeping out. She grabbed my belt and tugged. "I really need to talk," she said.

"You know, I just don't think--"

"I'm sorry about the other day," she said, tugging me away from the locker door, off to the side. "I know it was weird--"

"Forget about it."

"The thing is, I really like you. I mean, like I like like you."

"What happened to 'stay away from me'? The whole brain swapping thing? What the hell?"

"Come. I'll explain."

She led me around the corner, and we were alone in the shadows. The sun set in the distance, a big, orange ball sinking behind a bank of rolling clouds. "You know, Dasha and I..."

She covered my mouth with a kiss. I tried to push her away, but she'd grabbed me around the neck and half wrapped one of her legs around mine. She held tight, crushing her body into mine.

I felt static rising in my brain, stars in my eyes. We flickered between one another, me her, she me. When the kiss finally ended, I again tried to separate myself from her, but she clung to me, staring into my eyes, so I lifted her off her feet and turned us around so her back was against the school wall.

"What the hell are you doing?" I asked, my head throbbing, the world seeming to tilt and turn as I looked up at myself down at her, felt both our bodies buzzing, getting turned on.

"Don't fight it," she said, pulling me down for another kiss.

I have to fight this, I thought, but then I found my hands on her back, pulling her to me. I couldn't think, could only act, giving in to her demands of me.

So, I was cheating again, for the second time in the same day. This isn't me. This isn't who I am, I thought. But then I remembered: ident. Again and again.

We are what we do.

When the kiss second ended, Kisa put her hand to my cheek, running it along my stubble. "Let's go make out," she said. "Our van is just over here." She took my hand and started to pull me along.

"Van?" I said, remembering Victor and his little scheme. "What about your brothers?"

"They're at home," she said, tugging me along. "They don't even know I'm here. I told them I went to get milk."

I stopped. "I don't know," I said, trying to summon some will. "It doesn't feel right."

"Dylan," she said, smiling, her eyes sparkling. "I want to show you everything."

I found myself climbing into the murder van, and she slammed the sliding door closed, pulling her sweater off and tossing it aside before I'd even sat down on the bench seat. Were we about to go all the way? I was excited and nervous, but looking at her there in her black bra, smiling, flushed, impossibly pretty, I opened my arms, and she climbed onto my lap and we kissed.

"I don't know who I am," I said.

"That's okay," she said in this husky voice.

I kissed her along her shoulder, nibbled at her neck. She kissed me on the ear, the cheek, dragged her fingernails through my hair, along my scalp.

"I have memories I know aren't mine."

"I know," she said as we kissed and held each other. We shared each other's heat there in the cool van. "I do, too."

She found my mouth, and our tongues met, and then she tugged at my shirt, and we pulled it off me together. She ran her hands over my chest, my abs. "I don't understand," I said. "You warned me..."

"I can control it," she said. "Trust me."

"But why? What changed?"

"I couldn't wait anymore," Kisa said, twisting her hair around her fingers. "I need you."

Those words sent a tremor through me, and I can't say I was thinking anymore at that point. I just became a need that had to be fulfilled. I lifted her and lay her on her back, straddling her, kissing her, then kissing her down her neck, along her sternum.

Glitch. I was on my back, aching, and then on top again, me again, my hands moving over her soft body, and she laughed, arching her back, raking her fingernails along my ribs.

And she pulled me down for a kiss, and I felt her pulling me to her, and we pressed our bodies together, enjoying the feeling of us.

Glitch. I found myself looking in a mirror, at Dasha's face, a brush in my hand.

And then I was on my back, and had this ache low in my belly, this clenching and throbbing, and I felt Kisa struggling to unbutton my jeans...

And I heard Dasha calling out 'no, no, no!' and I saw myself--herself in the bathroom mirror--and I had a tube of fire engine red lipstick in my hand, and the words, "RUN!" had been scrawled across the mirror in jagged letters-

And I was me, pulling Kisa's jeans down, our bodies crushed together as I kissed her neck, and she was digging her fingernails into my back, burying them in my flesh.

And I was Dasha, running through the house, stumbling, Victor and Syria looking up in surprise...

My head started to pound, I felt like my mind shattered, and for a moment I was all three of us, and then I was on my back and Kisa was me on top of me. I gasped and then cried out as tears rolled from my eyes, and Kisa climbed off, and I felt suddenly so alone and so broken, and I wanted her to hold me, and I sat up and long hair tumbled into my eyes, and I said, "What the hell?" in a high-pitched, girl's voice.

Pulling my hair back from my face, I saw me zipping up my jeans. I was in Kisa's body, and I felt confused and afraid. My body felt all wrong. I tried to pull myself back into me, like I'd done before, but Kisa looked at me, her face impassive, and I felt a wall thrown up between us.

"No!" I said, trembling. "Give me my body back."

"Get dressed," Kisa said, grabbing a cell phone from the console between the front, bucket seats.

"What just happened?" I said, hugging myself.

"We switched bodies. Duh. Wait." She turned her attention to the phone.
"Yeah. It's done. She's fine."

"But, you said you could control it."

"Yup. That was a lie."

"But I don't understand. You made this happen."

"I sure did. Because you didn't listen, and it was the only way to stop Dasha from taking you."

It all seemed surreal. Impossible. I was sitting there in the body of a girl, talking to myself. "Change me back."

"No."

"No? Fucking change me back!" I shrieked, my voice sounding ridiculous in my ears.

"I don't like this anymore than you do," Kisa bellowed, making me lean back. "In fact, I hate being a guy, but this is where we are now because you didn't stay away from Dasha like I told you!"

The van door slid open, and I yelped, feeling-- exposed, embarrassed. Kisa's creepy brothers looked at me, smiling, and then started to laugh. "You should have listened."

"Get her back to the house and debrief her," Kisa said, tossing him the phone and climbing out of the van.

"Wait," I said. "Where are you going?"

"Home," Kisa said. "Bye. Be good now."

The van door slammed. One of the brothers climbed into the front seat, started the van and pulled out. "Where are we going?" I said, still in shock to find myself a girl.

"Home," he answered.

"Home?" I shook my head. "Wait--you mean?"

"You sister now. You Kisa. You live with us. Obvious is this."

"What if I refuse?"

"Okay. I put you on street corner like old couch. Someone comes and takes you."

"Oh, yeah," the other one said, glancing back at me. "Pretty girl gets lots of friends so fast on street."

The way he said it, the look in his eyes? It made me shiver. What would happen to me if I went out on my own in this body? Did Kisa even have any money on her? I realized I was still practically naked, my arms wrapped around my chest.

I saw the black bra on the floor, but the thought of putting on a bra just seemed wrong. That bra, in particular, with its lace and its little silk bow, and the memory clear in my mind of how turned on the sight of it had made me.

I'm a guy, I told myself, rebelling against the reality of my body. I don't wear bras.

I turned my back and pulled on the sweater. I kept myself turned away from creepy guy, not wanting him to see me-- and my eyes fell to the van's back door. I could make a run for it. At the next traffic light. I could open the door and just run like a crazy man.

But where? What would I do? Run home and try to convince my parents I was their son, body swapped into a girl? I could run to the police, but what would I tell them? I would probably get myself committed to a nut house. I glanced back over my shoulder at creepy guy, and he smiled and nodded, almost like he'd just read my mind and could see it in my face--the realization that I was trapped.

This couldn't get any worse, I thought, and right on cue I realized I needed to pee.

Shit.

CHAPTER 16

As the murder van made its way back to Keansburg, Chris, the brother in the back with me, explained. "You were in too deep with Dasha. She would steal your body soon, and then you disappear. We never find you. This way, we protect your mind all the time while Kisa protects body."

"Couldn't you have protected me without... this?" The sound of my voice irritated me. It was like I'd gone backwards through puberty again and become a child.

"You not listen. You let Dasha into your head. You were doomed. So, we makes the new plan. You did not listen."

"And you sure as hell better listen now," Nicki spat from the front seat. "You ever want to feel a pair of balls swinging between your legs again."

"I'm listening," I said. "You got my attention."

"I bet we did," Nicki said. "So just shut the hell up and be a good little girl."

"Be a what?" I said, punching the tattered seat cover.

"Hey," Chris said to Nicki. "Knock it off. Just drive the van." He turned back to me.

"Jerk, I said. Did he tell me to be a good little girl? I should punch him in the head.

Chris saw my anger, saw me staring at the back of Nicki's head, making a fist. "He's alright once you get to know him."

"No, I'm not," Nicki said.

"SHUT IT!" Chris bellowed.

I dropped my head and put my hands over my eyes, feeling my long hair tumble down, forming a little curtain around my face. I felt safe inside there, and just tuned out the bickering brothers as they shouted back and forth.

"When we get home it is time," Nicki said, "Time?"

"Time for you to make dinner."

"Me? What are talking about?"

"You girl. You cook now."

"I'll never cook for you," I said, disgusted.

"We'll see."

"Are you fucking with me?" I said, dumbfounded. "'Girls cook' went out in the 50s or something."

"So, you admit you girl?" Nicki said.

"Shut up."

When we got back to their run down, ramshackle house, my need to pee reached crisis point. My sister had complained it was harder for girls to hold it than boys, and I thought she just wanted to get ahead in line for the bathroom. But now, sitting there with my knees squeezed together, terrified I would pee myself, I asked for her forgiveness. I struggled to stand, terrified I would start leaking, and as we all climbed out of the van I tried to be cool.

A song started playing through my head, one of Kisa's songs from the playlist she'd downloaded into my brain, The Diet Cigs, Barf Day:

And I'm sick of being my own best friend

Will you be there in the end?

Who said I

Was a nice guy?

Not I

I didn't want to admit to my crisis to these other guys--it seemed too girly. They already seemed to have no respect for me as a man. So I just walked behind them, straining to keep from leaking, and then as soon as the door opened I said, "Where's the bathroom?" Trying to sound casual.

Nevertheless, the boys exchanged a smirk, and one said, "Down the hall to the left."

I hurried down the hall, passing the tiny little girl I'd seen the other day, ignoring her small wave as I plunged into the bathroom, wiggled out of my too small jeans and ruefully sat down on the cold toilet seat, squirming a little as nature took hold and my body did what it needed to do.

The song kept playing through my mind as the reality that I was really a girl sank in:

I just wanna have ice cream on my birthday

Blow the candles out and wish all of my pain away

I just wanna have ice cream on my birthday

Blow the candles out and wish all of my pain away

Away

Away

Away

A lot of stuff all seemed to hit me at once. I had no coping skills for suddenly finding myself in someone else's body, a girl, one I'd had a crush on. Sitting to pee hit me like a punch in the gut. I had always thought it was funny girls had to sit, and I had made fun of my sister for it, and now here I was sitting just like any girl, and I didn't know if I would be stuck like this forever or just long enough that I'd never be me again.

I felt my eyes burn with tears as I sat there, knees together, peeing. Just like a girl, as a girl, the girl I had become. It brought it all home to me, and I thought about my sister and brother, my parents, our dog, Chalker. I felt this space between us now, this emptiness, and even though I had never thought we were close I suddenly felt an agonizing sense of loss at the thought that I wasn't a part of my family anymore.

I might never be a part of my family anymore.

The burning tears poured down my cheeks, and I just wanted to run to them, hug them, promise to be a better son, a better brother. I wanted to tell them I loved them, but now I couldn't. I wasn't me anymore. I was just some girl, some stranger, and I felt this blow strike me, like I had died, and my whole body shook with great, heaving sobs.

I just wanna have ice cream on my birthday

Blow the candles out and wish all of my pain away

I just wanna have ice cream on my birthday

Blow the candles out and wish all of my pain away

Away

Away

Away

Even the sound track to my misery didn't belong to me.

"It'll be okay," I heard a small voice say from the other side of the door.

That little girl again. I took a deep breath, feeling myself growing calm. Something in her voice--it was so gentle, so vulnerable--made me want to be strong. "Thanks," I said. "I know. I'll be fine."

I dried my tears.

"Don't forget to wipe," the girl said, sounding a little embarrassed.

"Oh," I said, thinking: No. I am not going to be a girl.

And then, just like she'd read my mind, she said, "You have to, or you'll get infected. You don't want that. Trust me."

I thought about TV shows I'd seen, movies, girls with their feet in stirrups, their legs spread while some doctor poked around inside them. I shivered at the thought and said, "Okay," and started to pull some toilet paper off the roll.

"There's a trick to do it right," the little girl said, and she started to explain. As I listened, I found my hatred at the idea of being a girl growing. As a guy, it had been easy--pee, shake, pull up your pants. Now, I needed instructions on how to wipe myself.

I rolled the toilet paper up on my hand, and quickly wiped the way the girl had told me, then flushed and pulled up my panties and my jeans, trying to forget it had ever happened.

But I couldn't of course, nor could I forget what my body reminded me of every second, every step, every time I moved.

Guys: Let me pause for a moment to say, if you ever wondered what it's like to be a girl, I can tell you it's mostly-- weird. My old body was hard and flat--it didn't move on its own. But now, when I leaned over to pull up my jeans, I felt these big, soft mounds swaying, and when I stood they kind of bounced and jiggled. I felt like my butt was too big--and also a little bouncy--and my thighs felt fat, and my legs seemed too long and spaced out weird, and my hands kept bumping into my hips, which was annoying. But the biggest weirdest thing was just the way it moved on its own, like Jello

I had long hair again, and it kept getting into my eyes and mouth, so as I stepped out of the bathroom I had to grab it and pull it out of my face, and that little girl was standing there looking up at me with her wide, innocent eyes, and she said, "I'm hungry."

I stood there looking at her, shaking my head. "I'm not going to cook dinner-- just because--why can't those guys do it?"

"They won't," she repeated. "I'm hungry."

"I don't even know how to cook," I said. I found myself feeling strangely calm, like maybe my brain had just broken from any attempt at making sense of the fact that I was suddenly a girl--or in a girl's body, living in a new house with new people, kidnapped, essentially, and against my will. Yet, I was just having this conversation like it happened to me every day.

"I can help," the girl said. "But I can't reach the things."

I sighed, feeling my breasts rise and fall. They felt soooo big. I wondered if I would ever get used to them.

"Okay," I said. "But I am only making enough for us."

She smiled and grabbed my hand, dragging me toward the kitchen. "What's your name, anyway?" I finally asked.

"Charly," she said, looking back at me, smiling, her two front teeth missing, leaving a gap that made her almost look like a cute little goblin.

In the kitchen, Charly grabbed an apron off a hook on the wall and held it out to me. "So your sweater doesn't get dirty."

"No," I said. "I feel emasculated enough already."

"What's emasculumped?"

"Never mind," I said. "So, what do I do?"

I could hear Nicki and Chris mumbling as the sound of gunfire and explosions came from whatever video game they were playing, and for a minute I almost stomped into the living room and told them off, but my guts kind of twisted, that weird kind of butterfly feeling people talk about, and I just... decided to let it slide. Just this once.

The butterflies eased.

And then Charly was telling me what pots and pans to grab down from the cupboards. I had to grab a chair and climb on it to get to the high shelves that just a few hours before I would have been able to grab with ease, reminding me again of the limitations of my new body.

Then, Charly and I were cracking eggs and throwing bread crumbs into a bowl and mixing it together with spices she told me to get, and then we breaded veal and boiled water and when I just threw half the box in Charly said, "put the whole box."

"This is just for us."

"It's just easier if you make it for everyone."

"No. The boys--I mean, they-- can cook their own food."

"Please?" she said. "For me? I don't like it when the yelling happens."

The sound of her voice made something twist inside me, the butterflies returning, so I said, "Fine. I'll do it- for you."

Dinner done--it smelled pretty good, actually, and in spite of myself I felt kind of proud that I'd actually managed to do more than throw a frozen burrito into a microwave. I felt like I was adulting pretty good for once. Charly got the boys--the other boys--and they came in, sat down and gorged. Thankfully, there wasn't much talk, but Charly seemed quite pleased with everything and the goofy smile never left her cute little face.

Done eating, Nicki and Chris just pushed their plates away, got up and went back to the living room, the sound of explosions shaking the house once again. I looked at the dirty plates. I looked at Charly.

"You have to be kidding me," I said.

"It's just easier if we do it."

I groaned. I should be the one playing video games right now--not this. Was I letting them push me around now just because I had a female body? Was I--girling out--because of hormones or something? I felt so-- female, and yet I knew some girls who didn't take any shit. I couldn't think about it-- there wasn't time--Charly was giving me directions, and I soon found myself up to my elbows in suds, scrubbing down plates and pots, then wiping down the counters and the table.

"Done!" Charly said, triumphantly, raising her hands, which were covered in yellow rubber gloves that went all the way up to her tiny shoulders.

We high-fived, and then I looked blearily around the kitchen. I was tired, and the shock of my changed body and life was starting to hit me--hard. I needed some time alone. Some time to just--adjust? Or something?

I heard some guitars thrashing - Melkbelly singing "Perfect Roleplay"--and my head started to bob to the music. "Are you going to get that?" Charly said.

"What?"

"That's your phone." She rushed off to the bathroom and came back with a flashing phone. "It's you," she said.

"What?" Looking at the phone, I saw it read Dylan.

I swiped and put the phone to my ear, but it was blocked by a mass of thick hair, which I had to hook behind my ear. "Yes?" I said, testily.

"Kisa," I heard my voice say, though I sounded weird to me now, just like when you hear a recording of what you really sound like. "I just--"

"That's not my name," I snapped. "Give me my body back."

"We need to pretend to be each other" she said, lowering her voice conspiratorially. "Just for a little while."

I shook my head. "Why?"

"Didn't Nicki and Chris explain that to you? Those idiots. I thought I could trust them."

"They told me you were saving me from Dasha or something like that. Forgive me if I don't exactly feel saved right now."

"Yeah, okay. I know. This has to be really weird for you, but here's the thing--"

"I don't know how to be a--you," I hissed. "And your brothers have me cooking and cleaning for them like I'm their maid."

I heard her chuckle. Hearing her chuckle in my deep, masculine voice made my blood boil.

"You think this is funny?"

"Look. Just deal. We're going to set a trap. I need to be you, so I can lure Dasha in. Then, you get your body back."

"That's not going to work," I said. "When we were together, when you were swapping us or whatever- she was in there, too."

"I know. I felt her."

"But, so, she knows you're me. She won't fall for your trap."

"She knows I stopped her. We need to pretend to be each other until she takes another shot."

"How long will that take?"

"A couple days or--weeks."

"No way," I said. "No freaking way."

"Kisa, this is happening. You just need to chill and deal. Be a man about it."

"Be a-" I almost choked on the word. "Man? What about your brothers? Can you tell them I'm not their servant just because I'm a- I have this body?"

"It's just easier if you do it. Trust me."

"Arrrgghhhh! What about the patriarchy and all that girl power stuff?"

She completely ignored that comment. "You've met Charly?"

"Yeah. She's been--helping me or whatever."

"Good. Let me talk to her for a sec."

Charly and Kisa talked, then she put the phone down. "That's it?"

"That's it."

"Okay. Um, I need to decompress. I'm going to go to Kisa's room? It's down here?"

"Yeah."

CHAPTER 17

I made my way down the hall, went into Kisa's room and closed the door. There was the poster from Blood Wolf Academy. Her messy bed. Books piled on the floor. So many books. Just like my sister if my sister were a slob.

I lay down on her bed, rolling from one side to another, unable to get comfortable in her weird body, with her long hair falling across my face. I could not stop thinking about my-- um, bouncy parts.

I mean--I'm a guy. I like boobs. And now here I find myself alone with boobs right there on my chest, and which I had touched once. I couldn't decide exactly how high it went on the pervy-creepy scale for me to-- cop a feel--on myself?

I couldn't stop thinking about it, so finally, I put my hands on those big, soft mounds jiggling on my chest, feeling my palms against my nipples.

It was like my brain split in two, because I knew the fun of having a nice pair of boobs in my hands--the firm but soft mounds, the feel of squeezing, lifting that soft flesh... I sat up shaking my head... no... no... no... because I was feeling things and having thoughts a boy was never meant to have....

Shit, I thought. Shit. Shit. Shit.

I had to clear my thoughts, calm myself down. I didn't want to feel these--girl feelings.

I got up and decided I would go for a walk, but as I headed toward the front door, Nicki paused his game and got up, standing between me and the door. "Where you going?"

"Nowhere. I just need to take a walk. Clear my head."

He shook his head, frowning. "No."

"I'm not trying to run away or anything," I said. "I'm just - I need some air."

"Walking alone at night not safe for little girl."

"I am not a little girl," I practically screamed.

"Don't mean young," he said, holding his hand over my head. "I mean little. Short. Small. Man do bad things to you."

"Man?" I suddenly realized what he was getting at, and I shivered at the thought.

"This not so great neighborhood for pretty girl."

I stood there, dumbfounded. I understood what he was saying, and again I felt super conscious of this new shape I wore, and I remembered checking Kisa out when I was still- I mean, before we switched, and I kind of had to agree with Nicki about the neighborhood, but I was also still me, and I bristled at the thought of being treated like a--girl?

"I'll be fine."

"Not safe," Nicki said.

"I am not your prisoner!" I said, punching him on the chest. "Get out of my way!"

"That's my sister's body," he said. "I keep it safe even from dumb dumb inside."

I tried to shove past him, but he grabbed me and lifted me off my feet, carrying me over to the couch and plopping me down on my butt, my long hair falling in my face. Furious, I clenched my fists, thinking I was going to keep punching and kicking until he finally realized he couldn't push me around, but then I heard Charly call, "Kisa? Can you read me a story? Please?"

I looked over to see her standing in her pajamas clutching a book to her chest. Her eyes were wide and scared, like she was on the verge of tears,

and I felt my heart go out to her. I threw a nasty glare at Nicki to let him know this wasn't over, but then I got up and went to Charly. "Okay," I said, smiling. "Let's go." Glancing back at Nicki, I saw him grinning, and, making sure Charly wasn't looking, I made an obscene gesture.

Nicki stuck his tongue out at me.

Charly led me to her room--it was narrow, almost like a closet, with just enough room for her cot and a small dresser. She had no decorations, no toys that I could see, but there was a pile of books in the corner. Charly hopped onto her bed and crawled to the head, pulling back the covers and then wriggling under them, but leaving them turned down to her waist. "Tuck me in!" she said smiling, showing off that big, goofy gap between her teeth.

Feeling mostly pretty ridiculous, I pulled the covers up and trying my best to remember back to when I was little, tucked the covers in around her little body. "Good?" I said.

"Yup!" It amazed me how fast a kid's emotions could change, running through them like water. I started to take the book from her, but she pulled it back saying, "No! I hold it and turn the pages! You read."

"Sorry. I didn't know the rules," I said. The book was Tina and Her Techs. It was all about this little girl who could talk to technology--her phone, her Smart Pad, even her refrigerator and microwave. I got into it so deep I forgot all about my body, my problems, and it wasn't until the book dropped from Charly's hands and I looked down to see she'd fallen asleep that I remembered where--and who--I was now. I turned her light out and went to bed myself, falling into a deep restless sleep full of werewolves and vampires.

Chapter 18

In the morning, I faced the reality that I would have to get ready for school as a girl. I'd tried to claim I felt sick, but Nicki wouldn't have any of it. He bellowed at me about how me not listening got me into this, how I better listen now, a bunch of stuff like he was basically the worst parent, and I mostly got up just to make him shut up.

After my quick shower, I hurried out of the bathroom to Kisa's room, sitting on the edge of the bed, a towel wrapped around my torso. Charly stood on her tip toes, rifling through Kisa's dresser. The thought of going to school as a girl terrified me, but I didn't seem to have much choice. If I wanted to be a boy, I had to be a girl.

Charly dug into Kisa's drawer, then turned around holding a lacy pink bra in her hands, a wicked smile on her face. "This would look really pretty on you," she said.

I stared at the delicate little pink thing in her hands. The boy in me wanted to run in terror, and I shook my head. "No way."

Charly laughed. "You should see your face! You are such a boy!" She tossed the bra at me, and I actually dodged it as if it were a rock. Then, giggling, she pulled out a sports bra and said, "This one."

I shook my head. "Do I really have to wear one of--those?"

"If you don't, you'll wish you did," she said. "At least, that's what Kisa said."

"Maybe I'll just try without," I said, shrugging.

"Okay, but I hope you are ready to get a lot of stares from all the boys!"

Oh no, I thought. She was right. Kisa had pretty big boobs-- so I had pretty big boobs--and walking around school with no bra? I certainly didn't want to deal with what that would do to the guys. "The patriarchy wins," I said.

I took the sports bra from Charly. "Don't look!" I said, still holding the towel over my breasts.

Charly turned away.

I dressed as fast as I could. Baggy, flannel pajama pants, a baggy t-shirt, a flannel shirt, and a hoodie. I did everything I could to hide Kisa's curvy body. The thought of having other guys checking me out disgusted me. Charly helped me get Kisa's hair into a pony tail, and I pulled a crumpled baseball hat over my head and looked in the mirror. I might pass as a boy-- a freshman, maybe, who hadn't matured much yet. But I noticed that even with my baggy layers I could see the suggestion of a female shape, and it made me feel-- I don't know what, exactly. Not a bro?

I heard the horn honking from the murder van outside. Then, Chris shouting, "Come on! You make us late!"

Ugh. I had only been in a girl's body less than a day, and I had already become the stereotype of the girl who takes forever to get ready. I grabbed my backpack, and as we headed out the door together Charly shouted, "Race ya!"

I rolled my eyes but ran after her, and seeing her look back at me, her eyes full of childish joy, I couldn't help but smile. I let her win, and for a moment as we climbed into the van I was not thinking about myself or about this body, and I was actually pretty happy.

"You run like girl," Nicki said as he put the van into gear.

Chris waved his arms around, wrists flopping. "Yeah! Like - you were all-- aahhhhh! Ahhh!"

"I didn't run like that," I said, souring, but the boys just laughed at me.

"I walk you to the class," Nicki said as he parked the van. "You wait after class, and I get you. Make sure enemy stays away."

I started to object, but as I looked out on campus and saw all the kids walking around, I suddenly felt small and--nervous--worse than on my first day of high-school. I felt so self-conscious, and even though it made no sense, the thought that people would recognize me, that they would know it was me inside this girl's body, terrified me. I reluctantly accepted that I needed Nicki's protection.

I was so not ready to have some dumb bro hitting on me.

Chris took off and went wherever he had to go. I walked along slightly behind Nicki, and as we got into campus proper and the flow of students, I hesitated, feeling very small..

"You scaredy cat?" Nicki said.

I pulled my backpack on tighter and snorted. "Let's go." I marched along, not looking back, keeping my chin up, though my eyes were down, avoiding eye contact with anyone, and Nicki hurried to catch up, walking along beside me, towering over me. As we moved among the other students, I felt my lack of size. I had been one of the taller kids on campus, but now I found myself shorter than most of the boys and more than a few of the girls. I hadn't had to look up to so much of the world in a long time. As with my voice, it made me feel like I'd regressed into a seventh grader.

Still, I did my best to hide my feelings, not wanting Nicki to sense my insecurities. I saw a few kids I knew out of the corner of my eye, and I just wanted to crawl up into my hoodie and disappear, but of course no one recognized me. I did notice a few guys letting their eyes drift up and down my body, mentally undressing me, and I shivered, creeped out by the sensation, of being looked at like-- how many times had I heard girls complain about this and just laughed it off as proof of their over-sensitive, emotional natures?

But it felt really uncomfortable to be looked at like that. They looked at me like a piece of meat, and it felt--gross, plus I was so pissed. But they looked at me like--the word came to me--like they were entitled. I found myself thinking-- are you serious? Can't you see how I'm dressed? Isn't it obvious I don't want your creeping eyeballs on me?

But I knew they didn't care what I wanted--or else they were just so sure it would be the highlight of my day to have them 'check me out.'

Ugh!

Nicki dropped me off at the door. "Remember. Wait right here until I come to get you. Stay away from the enemy."

"Okay, okay," I said, embarrassed to have him talking to me like a child.

I went into the classroom and sat down in the corner of the back row, pulling my hoodie up and slouching down in my seat. I didn't even know what class this was, but I just had to lay low, not get noticed. How hard could that be, right?

Kelly Green came walking into the room wearing a tight sweatshirt that hugged her perfect tits, and when she turned to sit I got a really nice view of her butt in those leggings, and I wondered what she was wearing underneath, she was so fu--

Damn, I thought, brushing a strand of hair away from my face. I'm doing it. Right now. I covered my eyes, frustrated, unnerved by the strange feelings my body was making in response to looking at Kelly, and I vowed I would stop ogling girls. I had to stop.

That last about 14.3 seconds, when Irma Goldman came walking in wearing a top that left her shoulders exposed--as well as her gleaming, lime green bra straps. My eyes roamed over those perfect, brown shoulders, her long, slender neck, and right up to those plump, wet, smiling lips, which were just so perfect for-

She looked at me. Our eyes met. I saw a flash in her eyes, almost like she'd been reading my mind, then she smirked, rolled her eyes and tossed her hair, sitting down and pulling out her phone.

I felt so totally busted, and my cheeks started burning, and sank deeper into my chair, pulling my hoodie further over my head, wanting to vanish, but those feelings again-- I'd been imagining guy stuff when I looked at Irma, but my body was feeling things no boy ever felt, and it was like my brain had split in two and was having an argument with itself.

I wanted to grab my backpack, get up, run to the van and just hide for the rest of my life--or at least until I got my body back. But that's what kept me there, kept me sitting there struggling against all my crazy. If I wanted to get my body back, I had to play along, had to be Kisa, no matter how crazy that made me.

I suffered through the class, and when it ended I got up, my legs stiff and sore from sitting, and shuffled out to the hall, head down, glancing around from under the hair hanging in my face. I didn't see Nicki, and some kid bumped into me, knocking me against the wall. It reminded me of how much smaller I was now, and the reminder made me feel a little sick, so I just crossed my arms and leaned against the wall, feeling tiny and female and ashamed.

As I waited there for Nicki, I heard a familiar voice-- my sister, Hester. I glanced up through my bangs and saw her walking along with Brad Jennings. They were smiling, laughing about something. I looked at her hopefully, thinking she would see me in here, recognize me. But she glanced right through me like I was just some random kid, and I felt a sharp, stabbing pain in my heart to see her there and be ignored. We barely talked, weren't close, but now I was totally not a part of her life, and it was like I was on a ship sailing out to sea, and she and everyone I used to know was on the shore, walking away, dwindling into the distance.

"Let's go," Nicki grunted, kicking my foot.

"Don't kick me," I said, annoyed at the squeak in my voice when I wanted to sound pissed.

Nicki just laughed. I trailed behind him as he plowed a path through the herds of kids milling through the halls in our over-crowded school. It went like that through the morning, class, following Nicki. People left me alone.

Then lunch came. I got some gross looking meatloaf and greasy tater tots and sat down with Nicki and Chris. The Dakotas sat at a table in the opposite corner, and I noticed them looking at us, leaning together, whispering.

"They know," I whispered to Nicki. "I know they know."

"They don't know nothing," he said. "You worry like little girl."

"Knock it off with the girl stuff," I said, popping a tater tot into my mouth. My stomach turned a little at the taste of grease and salt, and I swallowed it down, but it seemed gross. I guessed Kisa's body had different preferences to mine. I didn't think it was a girl thing--I knew girls that loved junk food, but as I crinkled my nose, smelling a lump of the gray looking meatloaf smothered in what looked like red Play-doh, I heard Nicki snort.

"Kisa eats clean. This will maybe makes her body sick."

"What am I supposed to eat, then?"

"She brings food from home."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Stop with the constant bitching," Chris said, grabbing my tray.

"What did you call me?" I snapped, furious, but then I saw--me. I walked into the lunchroom, my arm wrapped around Cassie, and I--we--they looked really happy. Cassie snuggled into me, smiling up at me, and I just shook my head because they looked like a really happy couple.

When had we, they, gotten back together?

Looking at them--us-- I felt so sad, that same stabbing pain I'd felt in my heart when I'd seen my sister but multiplied by, like, ten million, and I covered my mouth, fighting against the sudden urge to cry. I missed Cassie, and I felt terrible now for how I'd taken her for granted, for how I'd almost cheated on her, had wanted to cheat on her. "Kisa got back together with Cassie?" I said, shocked. "When? Why? I mean-- I don't like her being me at all, and--"

Just then, Kisa leaned down and kissed Cassie, who touched her on her stubbled cheek and did a little leg kick, showing everyone in the lunch room they were back together and everything was fine.

"Knock it off!" one of the teachers yelled.

"What the hell," I said to Chris. "He--she--just kissed my girlfriend."

"Cool it," he said, grabbing my wrist. "You'll give it away."

"Yes," Nicki said, his mouth full of food.

"How am I supposed to cool it?" I said, trying to compose myself.

"Just remember you can get backs in your own body sooner if you can be the mans right now."

Cassie went and sat with our friends while Kisa went and got food for her. Then, she brought Cassie her food, reaching into her backpack and pulling out some kind of plastic container of food for herself. "I hope she isn't going to make my body addicted to weird girl food," I mumbled.

"Try not to stare," Nicki said.

I looked around the cafeteria, trying to avoid looking at the Dakotas, at me, and my eyes fell on the banners hanging on the walls. The cheerleaders always made a bunch of spirit banners for each week's game, and this week we were playing the Plainfield Cowboys. The banner read Rope those Cowboys! With a picture of a cartoon cowboy tied up, and underneath the words, Go Juggernauts!

I know. Not super creative, but the cheerleaders were all about tradition, you know? For a hundred years, each year when we played Plainfield, banners went up urging the team to Rope The Cowboys, and so too it happened this year.

Ident. Again and again. It was our school's identity.

Looking at the banner I realized I probably would not be putting on my pads and walking around the sidelines with my clipboard this week. I would be-- what? Staying home, I guessed, and reading Blood Wolf.

I would be Kisa, living her life, reading her books, thinking her thoughts. I wasn't a Juggernaut anymore. I just had jugs.

Lunch ended. Dasha seemed to be making a beeline toward me, and I felt myself start to shake, but then Nicki and Chris formed a wall between us. I slit my eyes at her, trying to look tough, and she glared back before walking away.

Nicki started to lead me to my next class, but I finally had to face something I had been both dreading and kind of excited about. "Um, I need to use the restroom," I whispered to Nicki, blushing.

He chuckled, which annoyed me, and then led me to a door with that standard picture of a robot wearing a triangle skirt. "Little girl's room for little girl," he said.

"Shut up," I said, grabbing the gleaming handle. I had always been kind of curious about the girl's bathroom, but I had never thought I would walk in as a girl. I half expected someone to scream there was a boy in the bathroom, but of course no one knew I was a boy in my brain.

Two girls huddled at the line of gleaming, white sinks as I walked in. One of them kind of played with her hair while the other one put on some lip gloss. She had a really hot mouth, and I found myself thinking impure thoughts, but then our eyes met in the mirror and she raised an eyebrow. "What are you looking at?" she said.

I looked away, my eyes falling to the line of stalls. I pushed one open, stepping into the stall, and then I turned, ruefully untying the tie at the top of my pajama pants, wiggling as I pushed them down over my hips, then doing the same with my panties, sitting down and squirming uncomfortably--the seat was cold. Then, I peed in fits and starts, embarrassed at the sound it made, before rolling up a wad of toilet paper and wiping myself.

I thought of Cassie, kissing me--Kisa--and felt my emasculation deeply, wondering what she would think if she knew I was a girl now, too, sitting down to pee, wiping myself just like any other little female.

I figured she would laugh, thinking it served me right.

CHAPTER 19

I ghost walked through the rest of the day, skipping out on the weight lifting class. There was no way in hell I was about to put on a little sports bra and yoga pants and lift with all those sweaty, horny guys looking at my ass. Plus, I didn't want to be in the same room as Kisa, so I decided to just skip, walking off after Nicki dropped me off. I found a tree to sit under and just pulled my knees up to my chest and-- breathe.

For the first time all day I didn't feel embattled, like there were boys all around me ogling me, thinking about what I looked like naked, wanting to touch me, and - other gross stuff. I was just me, and I sighed with relief. The tree I sat under was almost bare now, just a few leaves clinging to the denuded branches, rustling in the fall breeze. The air smelled like apple cider and wood fires, and I breathed deeply, allowing myself to smile.

I did it, I thought. I made it through the day! I could get through this, and then I would be me again, and I would appreciate being me, and I would

talk to my brother and sister, and I would appreciate Cassie, and I would work hard at football and become the starter next year, and nail my classes! Everything would be different. Everything would be better! I would be better. I was learning so much from this whole experience.

When I heard the bell, I grabbed my backpack and wandered back to the door outside the weight room. I didn't want Nicki to know I'd skipped class. I saw me walk out, my backpack over my shoulder. I knew I wasn't supposed to, but I started to call out, just wanting to say hi, but then I felt a hand cup my butt and squeeze.

I yelped, jumping away from the grabby hand. I turned, furious. "Hey!" I said, my squeaky voice betraying my tough guy impulses.

Kyle Graveson smirked at me. "Hey, shorty," he said. "Why weren't you in class? I missed seeing that hot little bod."

"Don't touch me," I said, furious.

He just laughed. "You love it," he said, walking up to me. "What's with the hobo clothes? You on the rag or something?"

"What?" I said, shaking my head. "I can't believe you just asked me that."

To my surprise, he stepped into me-- our bodies touching, and then he grabbed my arm. I wanted to push him away, or step away, but for some reason I kind of froze, and I found myself staring up in to his eyes. "I'm just teasing," he said. He brushed my hair away from my face, letting his fingertips trail along my jawline.

"Um-- I-- um--" My heart started racing, and I could feel my cheeks blushing. I was feeling things--new things--and it scared me, and I wanted to get away from him, but I couldn't move or think of anything to say. I'm a guy! I thought. I'm a dude. I don't let guys treat me like this. Then, he started to rub his thumb against my lower lip, and my whole body tingled, and I kind of rose onto the balls of my feet as there was almost some kind of--clenching--inside me. "Kyle," I finally said, and my voice sounded higher-pitched, breathy.

Kyle leaned down, tilting my head back, and I felt so powerless, totally under his control, and my eyes went wide because I knew he was about to kiss me, and there was no way I could let that happen, but then why was I just standing there, my head tilted back, my lips parting as I thought--no! No!

Then I felt someone grab my arm and pull me away. I looked up to see Nicki. "What are you doing?" Nicki said to Kyle.

"Hey, bro. Be cool," Kyle said. "Just talking." He popped the collar on his Penguin jacket and then walked by us, giving me a little wink. "See ya later, small fry."

We both watched him walk away, and to my shock and shame my eyes fell to his tight little butt, and I looked away, shocked at what I was feeling and thinking.

"I can't leave you alone for even a minutes," Nicki said, tightening his grip on my forearm.

"Ow," I said, as he dragged me to the murder van.

"We need to pick up Charly."

"Let go!" I said, yanking my arm free.

"I can't believe you were about to kiss that guy," Nicki said as we got into the van.

"He was about to kiss guy?" Chris said, laughing. "Maybe you should stay girl."

"Shut up," I said. "I wasn't going to kiss him."

"If I didn't show up, you would have his tongue playing jugglers with your tonsils," Nicki said.

"What the hells?" Chris said. "You only been in body for one day! Don't gives my sister kissing germs!"

"Better makes sure he doesn't makes the Tinder account. Slut looking for..."

"SHUT UP!" I screamed. "SHUT THE FUCK UP! I double kicked his seat, then hit him on the head.

The van swerved, and Nicki cursed, but the two of them finally shut up, and I sat, angry but satisfied that I'd finally gotten these two assholes to lay off.

The fact that I had just about let a boy kiss me was bad enough. I didn't need these two dorks giving me hell about it.

All the way home I thought about my encounter with Kyle. The way he talked down to me, calling Shorty and Small Fry, the way he invaded my space, grabbed my body like he owned it. What a jerk, I thought, my cheeks burning as I replayed the events in my mind. I huffed, blowing at my bangs. There was no way I was letting that jerk think he could get away with treating me that way. If I saw him again, I decided, I was going to put him right in his place!

Chapter 20

By the time the van pulled up to the curb in front of their shack, pebbles crunching beneath our tires, I found myself stifling yawns, straining to keep my eyes open. The guys got out of the car without saying anything, making their way into the house. I felt pretty good about having finally shut them up.

Charly tugged at my arm. "Come on," she said. "Read me a story before we make dinner."

"I'm shot," I said, blinking, my head pounding at the thought of cooking dinner for those idiots again. I just wanted to throw on my pajamas, climb into bed and sleep for a week. "I don't know why I'm so tired."

"You're--I think they call it synching?"

"Synching?"

"I heard them talking about it before. They say it's like, um, well... you know how if you get a pair of church shoes instead of sneakers? They can change the way you walk?"

"Yeah."

"A new body changes the way you think. It takes some time, makes you tired."

I sat up. "Wait. I don't get that. You mean I'm going to start thinking like Kisa? Will I forget who I am?"

"I don't know. I think a lot just has to do with adjusting to the working of your body. Your height, vision, hearing, the length of your legs. You're used to running one body, now your brain has to synch with another."

"How do you know that?"

Charly shook her head and shrugged, holding her hands out from her body. "I heard them talking about it."

I let her pull me to my feet and drag me out of the van, my backpack dangling from my hand. By the time we got inside, the guys had already taken up their positions on the couch, playing that same stupid game where they pretended to be Godzilla and King Kong smashing up cartoon buildings. I felt a pounding at my temples, infuriated at the way they sat there so arrogantly, their legs spread wide, a glazed look on their slackened faces. Couldn't they be working on some way to get my body back? Or maybe help with dinner?

Of course not.

As I let myself into Kisa's room, Charly trailed right behind me. I stopped, struggling to stay patient and kind. "Hey, kid," I said, kneeling down and tapping her on her little nose. "Um, I could really use a little alone time? Anyway, could you give me an hour or so to just be on my own?"

Charly bit her lip and nodded 'okay,' but I could see she didn't want to be alone, and I sighed. "You want to come in here?"

"Yes," she said.

"Okay, but you have to be quiet. I just need to close my eyes and rest for a little."

"Okay," she said. "You won't even hear me at all. Be right back."

I went into Kisa's room, and realizing I felt too tired to even change clothes I just crawled onto her bed, pulled her covers over me and buried my head in her pillow.

I suffered through fragmented, strobe-lit dreams-- jagged, feverish. I found myself in the weight room, doing curls with puny little five pound weights, wearing a sports bra and leggings, and I was smiling because the guys were all staring, and I could actually lift more than the five pound weights, but I wanted to be cute.

Then I was at a football game on the sidelines, but I felt the cool breeze across my bare legs, tossing my pleated skirt, and the other girls started to kick and I joined in smiling brightly, my hands on my hips...

I stood in front of my father. He sat at his desk in his study, smoking a cigar. I wore clothes pretty much like I always did--jeans, t-shirt, hoodie, but I was Kisa, and I put one arm across my chest as I stood there, sick with self-loathing.

"I'm sorry," I said as tears rolled down my cheeks.

My father frowned and said, "Get out of my sight you pathetic excuse for a son."

I sat up, shouting, "No!"

Charly, who sat in the corner brushing her doll's hair, jumped. "What?"

"Nothing," I said. It's not you. I had a-- bad dream."

"Are you okay?" Charly said, getting up and coming to me.

I felt a little stab of irritation, and I almost snapped at her for being so irritatingly loving and kind, but I bit my tongue. "It was just a dream," I said, feeling myself softening to her. Then, I glanced at the clock. "Are you hungry?"

"Yeah."

"Let's make some dinner."

Charly once more had planned out our menu. Something easy--burgers. Even I could smoosh some ground beef into round shapes and throw them in a skillet, but Charly also wanted us to make homemade fries, so she showed me how to chop the potatoes up and then we carefully put them into a crockpot full of hot oil. As the potatoes roiled in the golden oil, the room filled with the sweet smell of freshly cooking fries, and my stomach rumbled. Then, we put the burgers into a big, cast iron frying pan and got them going, while toasting the buns in a toaster oven.

It seemed like a lot to me given that we could have just bought a box full of frozen White Castle burgers and nuked them in the microwave, but as we prepared the food, Charly danced, smiling and happy.

"You really like this, don't you?" I said, once more finding myself unable to resist being drawn into her joyful spirit.

"Who doesn't like food!?" she answered, laughing.

"Um, no one, I guess," I said. "You got me there."

The guys wandered in without even being asked. "This smells so good," Chris said.

"You," Nicki said, "makes good little housewife."

I clenched my fist and turned on him, and the look on my face must have been really serious because he immediately backed away saying, "Sorry. Sorry!"

"Fine," I said, relenting, but once again pleased. I refused to let them totally push me around just because I had a girl's body.

As we cleaned up after, the phone rang. Kisa. I took the phone into my room. "You doing okay?" She asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I feel uncomfortable as you. I feel small."

"Yeah. I bet. I feel like a giant. It's strange to look down on almost everyone."

"I miss it. This has all really messed with my sense of identity. Of who I am. But you know that nature versus nurture debate? I think nature has a lot more to do with it than I ever realized. You know what I mean?"

"Oh, I do. I've jumped bodies before, and every body has its own demands."

"I feel like I'm just a passenger. Like your body is running the show sometimes." I was thinking about the incident outside the locker room, how I'd found myself just standing there. "It was different before, in my body. I called the shots."

"Or, maybe you were just used to the habitual behaviors, so they felt more like you?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's hard to explain, but--you know how you do drills in football? Maybe the coach has you drop, roll and pop back to your feet?"

"Yeah."

"If you do that long enough, it eventually becomes a habit, so when you get knocked down in a game, you just roll and pop back onto your feet. It just happens. You don't even think about it. It's become a habit."

"Yeah. Or, like when you drive home and you don't remember the drive?"

"Right. Well, if the drop, roll and pop is in your body's muscle memory, but not in your memory--"

"It will feel weird, like the body is running the show?"

"Exactly."

We both chuckled. It felt good to hear her voice. She sounded nothing like I sounded to myself in my head, so it wasn't weird at all. I liked that we were getting to know each other, and I felt comfortable enough to say, "You must have trained your body to kiss boys."

She laughed. "Wait. What happened? Did you kiss someone?"

"Almost," I said. "I almost couldn't even stop myself."

"Well, I do like to kiss," she said. "But it could be estrogen, too."

"But not all girls like to kiss guys."

"That body you are in definitely likes guys-"

"Great."

"--but you can still say no. You don't have to scratch every itch. You have a choice."

"That reminds me," I said. "You did go to football practice, right? I don't want to get kicked off-"

"I went. I wouldn't mess up your life like that. It was actually pretty fun."

"You did all right?"

"I picked up your memory of the play book. I almost got into it with some guy."

"What?"

"Yeah. He hit me low, after the whistle. I grabbed his face mask and pulled his helmet right off."

"I guess you aren't used to all the testosterone," I said.

"Something like that. By the way, your family is great."

I had meant to ask her about Cassie, but hearing her call my family 'great' made my jaw drop open in shock. I mean, I missed them now, and it really hurt to not be a part of whatever family life we had, but, seriously? "Great?" I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "We hardly ever talk."

"What? I had coffee with your mom, and she was such a Chatty Cathy."

"You had coffee?" I shook my head in disbelief. "With my mom?"

"Oh. Yeah. Um, I hope that's okay? I haven't had a mom in so long, and I just thought it might be okay with you?"

"It kind of probably isn't," I said. "I feel like you are invading my space a little--a lot. But, wait. How did you end up hanging with my mom?"

"I asked her."

The phone was silent. I felt so many feelings, and I didn't understand them. "I never thought of that," I said.

Kisa laughed. "Well, you are a guy."

"Yeah, I guess," I said. "But it still makes me feel-- I don't know? Weird. And what's the idea of getting back together with Cassie? I have to deal with that now."

"Oh. Sorry. I know. But, um, it's part of our plan. The Dakotas will not like seeing you get back together. The closer you are to Cassie, the harder for them to steal your body. They want you crushing on Dasha, so I am trying to force their hand. Plus, it's supposed to help convince them you are still you, so-

"You're using Cassie? For your plan?"

"Yeah?"

The pounding in my temples came back, intensified. "I am not cool with this. Not at all. Cassie is a nice girl. You, we, can't just toy with her feelings like this."

"Do you want your body back or what?"

"Oh, please, don't try to make this all my thing. I never told you to mess with Cassie. I can't believe you."

"Maybe it was a little insensitive--"

"--a lot--"

"But we've gone this far, and I think the plan is working. We may be able to end it this Friday."

"Friday?" I said, relieved. That was just a few days away.

"Yeah. I think so. Then, you can make things right with Cassie yourself."

"I will. She's very sensitive, and I want her to be happy."

Kisa chuckled. "Look at you, all sweet and sensitive."

I rolled my eyes. "Just be nice to her. I--well, I probably didn't deserve her in the first place, and I know I was a jerk after all that stuff with the video."

"She's pretty amazing," Kisa said. "You have her back if you want her."

"I don't know what I want anymore," I admitted. "You really hung out with my mom?"

"Yup. She's pretty funny."

"Funny? My mom? What the heck did you guys even talk about?"

Chapter 21

Kisa had to go and do my homework, so the phone call ended-- too soon for me. I felt connected to my old self, my old life when I talked to her. It made me feel grounded and solid.

On my own I felt like a kaleidoscope, like the pieces of chunks that made me now were constantly shifting and rearranging, creating new configurations. Sometimes, I was similar to what I'd been an hour earlier, something completely different.

I lay on my bed, and cracked open Blood Wolf Academy Three. By this time, Dani Fang had won out, becoming her generation's pack leader, with Gruffin her loyal and devoted mate. She'd found the people who'd murdered her parents--vampires, of course--and brought them to justice, deciding at the last minute that she would not kill, but would break the cycle of violence.

Now, her little sister had been kidnapped by the mother of one of the vampires Dani had locked up in her dungeon:

Mothers. It always comes back to them wanting to control us. But couldn't she see that she'd failed, that her whole generation had failed? It's time to step aside old woman, I thought. I guess I'm going to have to take away the car keys, because you can't drive.

By the way, if you've never experienced it, reading a book as a girl is totally different from reading it as a guy. The first thing is, it's hard to read when you're a girl because your brain is mostly obsessing on shopping and Kylie Jenner's baby bump. So, you have to read really slow, like half the speed of a guy.

Secondly, I am totally full of shit. In fact, reading is reading. It didn't seem any different to me at all.

I started nodding off, but before I went to sleep I grabbed my phone and texted Kisa:

'Great talking to you tonight. Sleep well.'

I looked at the message. Did it say what I meant? Too much? I didn't know, but I pressed send.

I saw the '...' that meant she was responding, and I rolled onto my back, smiling. The answer came:

'Good talking to you, too. Night.'

I stared at the words, feeling warm and a happy buzz. I drifted off to sleep clutching the phone to my chest.

I woke the next morning, day two of my new life, and already it had started to feel routine. Yesterday, everything had felt weird and embarrassing, but now it felt a little more whatever. I did stare at Kisa's eyeliner for a minute. I had the urge to put it on for a while, but I resisted. Still. Besides, I'd overslept and didn't have time to do my makeup.

I did stuff Blood Wolf III into my backpack.

Nicki still insisted on walking me to class. We passed the Dakotas at one point, and exchanged some seriously intense stares. I thought I felt someone nipping at my mind for a sec, but Nicki blocked them, and we walked past. I pulled up my hoodie and slouched my way through class.

But then we walked into the lunchroom and I saw Hester sitting alone in the corner, reading. I veered away from Nicki. "Hey!" he said. "Don't--"

I ignored him and walked over to my sister. She looked up as I approached. "Hello?" she said, looking over the top of her book: *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sleep?*

"Hey. Mind if I sit?" I said. I felt my heart race, a queasiness in my stomach. I didn't know what I felt, exactly. This body's emotional cues didn't make sense to me. I still felt that odd little hope that somehow she would see me in here, recognize her brother.

"Sure," she said, with that little hrmmpf of annoyance she always made when someone interrupted her reading. "Do I know you?"

Yes, I thought. Yes. I almost blurted it out, but I didn't. Because I had come here to do something I'd always wanted to do, and never bothered to do. I wanted to get to know my sister. "No. Hi. I'm--my name is Kisa?"

"I'm Hester."

"I'm new," I said. "I just moved here. I saw you sitting alone and...?"

"It's totally cool," Hester said. "So, where did you move from?"

"I heard you're into *Blood Wolf Academy*?" I blurted out. "I love those books."

Hester sat back, looking at me like--who is this girl? "How did you hear that?"

"Oh, um, your brother. We have gym together."

"Of course. I don't know if I like that's the first thing you knew about me. God. My brother is such an idiot sometimes."

"Idiot?" I pulled my lunch out of my backpack. Having learned my lesson the previous day, I brought food that would settle better in Kisa's body. "I thought he seemed pretty smart."

"Not idiot dumb but idiot like a little brother idiot."

I thought about how I'd teased her over the years. I thought about Nicki and Chris. "Brothers can be annoying."

"So, have you read the whole series? Blood Wolf?"

We started talking about the books, which led to relationships, which led back to books, and favorite authors, and which adaptations of said books sucked and which didn't. I got lost in our words, our conversation. It was almost like swapping. Our conversation flowed so easily and our ideas intermingled, and when the bell rang I felt like I'd been snapped back into a cold, harsh lonely space where I occupied just one body and mind, rather than being occupied by a conversation.

"I have a lot more to say about Rapunzel suddenly morphing into a brunette when she becomes marriage material," Hester said as she tucked her book under her arm. "But, alas, the bell tolls for thee!"

I shook my head.

"John Donne. Hemingway stole a line from the poem for the title of a book."

"Oh," I said, pretending I got it. "Right."

We decided we liked each other. Exchanged phone numbers. As we separated, I felt almost a little teary eyed. For the first time in my life, I felt like I actually had gotten to know my sister, and she was--I hate to admit--but she was actually really awesome.

"It was great meeting you," I said, savoring the secret irony. I wondered if I ever could have interacted with her like this as me, could have gotten to know her, or would she have had her armor up, been defensive? Would I have been able to drop my guard and be me, rather than make my smart-ass jokes and put her down?

Had becoming Kisa allowed me to be more me? I was puzzling over all that, basking in the glow of our conversation, when I felt pain shooting through my arm.

Nicki had grabbed it, squeezing so hard it hurt. "You didn't tell her anything?" He said, leaning down and hissing in my ear.

"No! Let go of me!"

"Don't do stupid thing again!"

"I can do what I want!"

"No, you can--"

"Everything okay?" Mr. Makinnen said, pushing himself off the wall he'd been leaning against.

Nicki let go of my arm. Smiled. "This my sister."

"You okay?"

"I'm fine," I said, rubbing my arm. The last thing I needed now was to have DYFS come and put me into foster care.

"You kids get to class. And be nice to your sister!"

"I am always," Nicki said.

We walked out into the hall. "Soon, soon, soon. Just be good girl and we makes you boy again."

I just glared at him and kept rubbing my arm.

CHAPTER 22

Kisa and I kept texting. Just little stuff. 'How are you?' 'How was school?'

She started sending texts that were nothing but emojis. I answered with nothing but emojis. It was almost like we were creating our own language.

When we talked on the phone, she talked a lot about football, and I could tell she was actually getting super excited about her first game.

I was also texting and hanging out with my sister, which was so amazing. We talked about books and where we wanted to go to college, what we wanted to study, how the baby boomers had destroyed America and how our generation had to fix it. The Harvey Weinstein thing hit, and Hester was triumphant. "We're finally saying enough is enough!" She said. "Yes!"

"That is awesome," I said.

Friday arrived with no word on any plan to get my body back. When I asked what was happening, all anyone would tell me was "Patience. Patience."

I sat home Friday night. On days of a home game, the coach had all the players hang out down in the locker room from right after school until game time. It was to keep them out of trouble. I missed being there with the guys, my team, but thinking of Kisa there in my place I texted her--'Good Luck! Don't get splinters from that clipboard!' On impulse, I added a heart emoji, feeling weird about it, but I just hit send and then buried my phone under my pillow.

Nicki and Chris had gone out. Just before he'd left, Nicki had said, "Remember. If you run away, you can make lots of money as the topless dancer." He raised his arms over his head and shook his shoulders side to side.

"Why do you always have to be so ugly?" I said.

"Don't run away!" he barked, and they both wandered off into the night.

Charly invited me to sit with her and mainline Pretty Little Liars, but I wanted to read, so I went into my room and crawled into bed. This was the first time in three years the football team had a game and I wasn't a part of it. I ached. I missed the guys, the smell of the turf. I even missed the honking of the band as they butchered pop songs from every era.

I missed Cassie.

I missed me.

You don't appreciate what you have until it's gone. My mother always said that, plus assorted other things boring adults with miserable lives I would never want, like to say.

But she'd been right about this one. It hurt how much I missed football, my clipboard, being on the sidelines, being a part of it. I had to get it back, needed to get it back, and I swore that when I did get my life back there would be no more slacking, no more half-hearted living. I would live my life a werewolf--all fangs!

I tied my hair back into a pony tail, adjusted my bra straps, and snuggled into bed with Blood Wolf III. Each book had gotten longer and more complex, but I only had, like, 150 pages to go. I started reading and lost myself in Dani Fang's life and adventures, losing track of time, losing track of myself.

When I finished the book, I threw it across the room and cried into my pillow. I don't want to ruin it for you, but the ending made me super mad and sad. It was that kind of ending you love so much you hate it.

I sent Hester a text. I sent Kisa a text. I couldn't stand to be alone with my pain and joy and all the shifting kaleidoscope that was me, shaken up and rearranged. I needed someone to stabilize me, but no dots came back. No one was on their phone. The game probably wasn't over, and Hester had gone out on a date.

I guess I'm going to have to just deal, I decided, thinking about going to the fridge for some ice cream. But then, another idea struck. I got up and went to Kisa's closet. I'd seen it in there before, hanging like a threat. One of those old-fashioned dresses from the 50s. Punk rock girls, and rock-a-billy girls--they liked to wear them. I guess Kisa sometimes did the ironic 50s housewife thing when she partied.

I touched the material. It felt cool and smooth. I wondered what it would feel like to wear something like that. What I would look like.

I slipped the dress off the hangar and laid it out on my bed, went to the bedroom door and poked my head out. "You good?" I called to Charly.

"Good," she called back from the living room.

I could hear the Pretty Little Liars conspiring about something.

I locked my door. Why not? I thought, looking at the dress. My heart started racing, and even though all it was, was putting on an article of clothing, and one that now suited my gender, I felt like I was about to commit some kind of deep, dark unforgivable sin.

Boys don't. Boys don't. That little phrase echoed in my mind. Boys don't.

I still felt like a boy. I still considered myself a boy, deep down at my core, whatever that was or if it even existed. Did wanting to put on that dress make me a girl? Did it mean I wanted to be a girl?

Why should I be embarrassed just to try it on in secret, with no one even watching?

I sighed, picked up the dress and realized I didn't know how to put it on. Do you pull it over your head or step into it? The top of the dress seemed too small to fit over my hips, so I lifted the dress over my head and then pulled it down, shimmying into it, struggling to get my arms through the arm holes, feeling trapped. Twisting, my hair got caught in something and I yanked painfully and somehow got my arms in the right holes, and the skirt fell down to just above my knees, and I got my head through the collar, untangling my hair, and then I pulled and tugged and twisted until finally I had that damned dress on, and I sighed, plopping down on the corner of my bed.

Wow. Dresses were hard to put on. Yikes. I got up and looked at myself in the mirror. The dress had one of those skirts that flared out like in an A shape, so it kind of floated around my legs, while the top hugged my upper body. I looked cute. The dress just had this quality of cuteness to it, and I couldn't help but feel a feminine flush pass over me as I saw myself in this cute little outfit.

I knew my dad would punch me in the head if he saw me like this. It was everything he hated times 1000. He once called me a pussy for putting gel in my hair. He was always railing against sensitive men who expressed their feelings, metro-sexuals who got their fingers manicured. He even thought guys who had long hair were half-gay, and I wondered where that came from since he grew up in the seventies and constantly blabbered about Led Zeppelin who had LONG HAIR.

Well, how do you like me now? I thought, turning this way and that, looking at myself in my dress, which accentuated every curve.

The mirror didn't lie. I was a girl wearing a dress. I mean, I this body was all girl. But I felt like a guy still, just a guy who looked cute and felt cute and didn't care. I also felt less lonely, less empty, and more grounded, so I did a little twirl, just to see what my skirt would do, and then my eyes fell to the make-up tubes and brushes Kisa had scattered across her dresser top.

I shrugged. Why not?

Boys don't. Boys don't.

I saw my father sitting in his man cave in the basement, beer in hand, watching football, eyes glassy, a perpetual frown on his face because, of course, football players were a hell of a lot tougher in the old days.

I imagined myself standing in front of him, dressed like this, wearing make-up. His oldest son. Football player. Pride and joy, right? What would he say?

"I'm trying to watch TV."

I picked up Kisa's eyeliner. My eyeliner. If my Dad was a model of manhood, then being a man meant misery: working a job you didn't like, to provide for a family you didn't love. Numbing yourself with booze and spending your life watching football. Watching the news. Watching news about football. Watching. Complaining. Watching. Complaining. Was that manhood?

Or is it just fear dressed up in a suit and tie?

One thing my Dad had said was that being a man meant facing your fears.

I'd been afraid to put on this dress. I'd been afraid to put on make-up. I'd put on the dress. Maybe it was time for me to face another fear?

I took the cap off the eyeliner, and I smiled into the mirror. "Here's to you, Dad."

And then I giggled, and drawing on memories and impulses I'd picked up from Kisa, I did my eyeliner, then mascara, plus a little blush on my cheeks and some lipstick that made my lips look wet and kissable. Looking in the mirror I laughed. I looked ridiculous. I looked pretty. I looked like a girl. I was a guy. It was fun, and I couldn't believe I'd been afraid of this.

I walked out into the living room and plopped down next to Charly in my dress, with my face all pretty, and she looked over and said, "What's the occasion?"

"I just felt like being a man tonight."

She smiled, her gap-toothed smile, and said, "Okay, but this is a good part, so sshhhhh." She turned her attention back to her smart pad. I chuckled to myself. It may seem odd, but the fact that Charly didn't seem to care just made me feel even more ridiculous about my just banished fears.

I tucked my legs under me, put my arm around her and watched. Now, if you've ever wondered how it's different to watch *Pretty Liars* when you're a girl in a rock-a-billy dress versus a guy in jeans, let me tell you this: I don't know. I never watched it before.

CHAPTER 23

A little before midnight, the witching hour, I heard the thumping of hard core metal and the rattling of the murder van as it pulled to the corner outside our bungalow. Charly had fallen asleep and I'd carried her to her room. I'd heard some of the girls at school talking about *Riverdale*, so I'd pulled it up on Charly's smart pad. I couldn't decide if I loved or hated Veronica. But if I were stuck as a girl I think I would rather be her than Betty, who was just so nice I wanted to stab her.

The door slammed open. Nicki and Chris, obviously drunk, stumbled in, and then my mouth dropped open. Kisa stood in the doorway behind them, her hands shoved into her Letterman jacket. She had a crooked smile on her face, and a black eye, and a couple days' worth of stubble on her chin.

And I was wearing a dress. And make-up.

Nicki and Chris laughed at me. "You look like sluts from *Johnny Rockets*," Nicki said, but they stumbled into their room and the door slammed behind them.

I seriously just wanted to run to my room and slam the door. It was one thing to put on a dress and sit around the house with Charly, but having Kisa look at me, to see me like this, it made my body do all kinds of blushing, clenching, fluttery things, and that feeling of being cute and, I

guess, feminine came over me like 1000 times stronger, and I felt scared of what I was feeling partly because I didn't know what I was feeling.

Kisa looked me over and smiled. "What's the occasion? You look-- cute."

"Cute?" I stayed on the couch, my legs tucked under me. For some weird reason I became very self-conscious about my arms. They felt like weird tubes stuck to the sides of my body, and I shifted, putting them in my lap, at my sides, then crossing them under my chest. "I was going for macho."

"You missed the mark just a little," Kisa said, chuckling. She walked in and dropped down on the couch next to me. "You put on make-up?"

I looked away. "I don't know what I was thinking. Would you mind if I ran to my room and changed?" I started to get up, but Kisa grabbed my wrist and pulled me back down. I scooted away from her, not feeling comfortable with our bodies close together.

"Stay."

"I'm super uncomfortable in this dress," I said.

"I can't stay long. I shouldn't be here at all, but the Dakotas don't know you're here. I needed to see you."

"Why?"

"Do I need a reason? I care about you, Kisa. I want to make sure you're okay."

When she called me Kisa, the deep sound of her voice, the concern I heard? That fluttering and shifting got worse, my mind jumbling and struggling to understand what my body was trying to tell me. "What happened to your eye?" I said, resisting the urge to touch her face.

"Oh. Wow. I scored a touchdown!"

"What? How?"

"Kyle got hurt. Concussion. I had to play." Her eyes lit up, and her face got even more handsome. "The first series didn't go well. Three and out. I missed a wide-open receiver. I still--damn!" She pounded her fist into her palm.

She stood up, getting excited, and with her standing that close and being that tall, I had to tilt my head way back to meet her eyes.

"So, there was only, like, three minutes left, and we got the ball, and the coach grabbed my face mask and he was like, 'This is on you. Play like a Champion.' And I was all, 'I'm gonna do it for the team,' which I'd heard someone say on Friday night lights one time. So, we ran the ball like two times, and then it was third and one. The coach called for an option play."

Which one?" I asked, getting excited as she got excited. I couldn't believe what a--boy--she was becoming.

"Pistol Right 40."

I nodded, and pulled my pony tail around to the front of my shoulder, twisting it in my fingers.

"The center snapped the ball, and me and Washington ran to the right. I faked like I was going to pitch it, and the linebacker who was supposed to account for me bit, and I saw all this green opening up in front of me, and I felt this rush of pure like freaking joy, and I tucked the ball under my arm and ran and ran, just looking at that goal line, and just as I got down to maybe the five yard line some kid caught up to me, and I felt him slam into my back, and he tried to punch the ball out of my arms, and I stumbled forwards, holding the ball as tight as I could, and then somehow his other hand came around my helmet and one of his fingers jammed right into my eye, and I dragged him right into the endzone, and then it was like BOOM as the cannon went off, and I got up and I was like 'ARRRRRRRRRRRRR!' like a caveman, and the guys were all slapping me on the helmet, and then I was on the sidelines and it was all a blur, but we won!"

"Wow!" I said, my voice squeaking. "You won the game!"

"I did. I really did!" He, she, opened up her arms, and despite my discomfort I got up and gave her a hug, my body sending off all kinds of strange signals as I felt me, all small and soft, pressing against her, all hard and tall. She put her hands on my slender waist, and then I felt them slide down a little onto my hips. My body started buzzing, and I felt myself being drawn to her psyche, my brain seeking hers, wanting to swap, but she pushed me back mentally, while pulling me closer so our chests pressed together.

I leveraged myself out of her arms pretty fast, and stepped away. I felt so small standing next to her, but good small, somehow. Looking up at her there in her letterman jacket, with her black eye and her stubble, I suddenly felt like I didn't know her at all. Like I never knew her. "I didn't know I could run like that," I said.

"Yeah, well, I guess you didn't have to worry about me messing up your life. I'm doing a better job of being you than you did."

Those words stung. I guess she could see it in my face, because she said, "I'm just teasing."

I managed to force a smile. I felt soooo awkward standing there, my dress swirling around my knees. The sticky, tacky feeling of my lipstick. I didn't know what to say or do, so I just found myself kind of shifting from foot to foot.

"I better go," Kisa said. She stepped forward and put her arms around me. I hugged her back and felt her kiss me on top of the head. "You really do look so cute," she said as he headed out the door. "You should wear dresses more often."

The door closed. I felt my whole body blush, and I put my hands to my feverish cheeks. What had just happened? I felt like Kisa had been--but no. That was too weird. She wouldn't?

I replayed the scene in my mind, and as I did so that feeling that I was blushing right down to my toes came back, and with it a tangled mass seemed to knot up inside me, and I knew but I didn't know. I must be imagining things, I thought. I'm being crazy.

Kisa wouldn't be hitting on me. She is me.

I went to my room and dropped onto my bed like a stone, put on my headphones and cued up my Punk Girls Playlist. An old song came on, I think I heard it in a movie once:

Take me now baby here as I am

Pull me close, try and understand

Desire is hunger is the fire I breathe

Love is a banquet on which we feed

That did not help the situation. I knew what I had to do. I just hoped it worked as well for girls as it did for boys. I took a long, cold shower, and I thought about football until I fell asleep.

CHAPTER 24

Friday had come and gone. The weekend passed. I read, hung around the house. The weather was actually really nice, and on Saturday I desperately wanted to get out, do something, go somewhere, but Nicki and Chris just wanted to sit on the couch playing video games, their eyes glassy, faces slack. I hated them the most like that.

"Let me take the van," I said. "I'm not going to run away. I'll take Charly to the park."

"Go reads book," Nicki said. "Park not safe for little girls alone."

"You're an idiot!" I said, spinning on my heels and storming off to my room.

I finally just put on my coat and a winter hat, some mittens, and sat on the back steps and read. Charly came out and was amusing herself digging in the yard, ripping up the ghetto grass and the hard ground, which kept revealing chunks of broken beer bottles. "It's like sea glass," she said, "but so ghetto!"

I laughed, and went back to my book. I was starting to think I might need to take matters into my own hands. I could teach myself to swap. Jump back into my own body. But who to practice on? I looked at Charly, with her scrawny little body and gap toothed smile. No thanks. What if I got stuck in there? I didn't like the idea of being stuck as a little kid.

Nicki. That idea amused me. I would love to see his face if I stuck him in this body, but then a strange protectiveness came over me. I didn't like the thought of Nicki in my sort of body, and the thought of picking up any of his memories or impulses grossed me out.

So, Chris?

I didn't know much about him. He seemed okay. So, I probably wouldn't pick up too much weird stuff. Probably. It was at least an option.

If someone didn't tell me something soon, maybe I would have to try it. I went back to reading, half paying attention to Charlie as she played. "Be careful," I called out without looking up from my book as I caught sight of her cartwheeling across the yard. "You'll hurt yourself."

"Okay, MOM," she said, sarcastically.

Oh no, I thought. Please tell me I'm not turning into my mother. I went back to my book, bemused. Just one more thing to add to the list of things guys should not have to worry about.

Sunday passed. Monday I trudged back to school. I did not put on eyeliner or anything even though I kind of wanted to, mostly because I was worried some horny guy might take it as a sign I was looking and start harassing me. As it was, my lab partner in biology, Frank Proctor, kept staring at my boobs when he talked to me. Luckily, or maybe not so luckily, he was too shy to do much else other make some touchingly sad attempts at flirting. "Oh, um, are those new shoes? You look good standing in them."

"They're old," I said, hiding a grin behind my best 'I am not interested, dude,' face.

"Your hair smells like strawberries."

"That's Selsun Blue," I said. "I have terrible dandruff." I'd hoped that might scare him off, but he just said, "That's cool," and stared at my boobs.

He touched me on the arm once, and when I gave him a hard stare he yanked his hand away like I was made of molten lava and apologized so many times I actually wanted to strangle him.

Nicki kept most of the guys away. He looked weird and dangerous in a wiry 'outsider with nothing to lose' kind of way, and though I was pretty sure I could handle myself, there were times I was glad he was there, and I even

thought once about asking him to talk to Frank for me, but rejected the idea on the grounds it was pretty lame of me to even think it.

Every day I got up thinking--soon this will be over. But the day would pass, and nothing would change and no one would tell me anything. The idea of trying to swap with Chris seemed silly, and I resigned myself to these Kisa days, and waited for the day the big plan would come to pass.

Then, I got THE CALL.

I had managed to get through another school day-- it was Thursday, the day before the next game, Kisa's first as a starter since Kyle's injury hadn't cleared. This week we were playing the Spartans. The cheerleaders had created banners vowing we would Smash the Spartans, scorning my much superior suggestion that we Thermopylae them.

So, that Thursday I lay on Kisa's bed. Having finished the Blood Wolf cycle, and fearing what might happen should I read High Moon, I had decided to go old school and read a classic: Wuthering Heights. My sister had been reading it in AP English, and she couldn't stop raving about it, so I'd started reading and gotten totally drawn in from, like, only the first page. Charly sat in the corner watching something on a smart pad, earphones in her ears.

I'd come upon a quote that had really caught me: "I cannot express it; but surely you and everybody have a notion that there is or should be an existence of yours beyond you. What were the use of my creation, if I were entirely contained here?"

An existence of me beyond me. I assumed she meant a soul, or some sort of spiritual essence. I had never really given it that much thought as I got older; we went to church but we weren't religious. Maria Bamford said that

her mother taught her that whatever we think about all the time is our god, and Maria had been forced to conclude that her mother's god was Diet Coke.

Mine had been football, or maybe Me, neither of which God demanded I spend a lot of time worrying about whether I had a soul and if I did what state it was in. But then this had happened. I got girled. And the question had started to gnaw at me.

What had been taken out of my body and placed into Kisa's? My soul? Or just the memories, the stuff inscribed in my brain? Was there more to me than my brain and body?

Had she somehow just copied all the memory files from my brain and swapped them into hers? Like cloning a phone? If there was no soul, all that existed of me were those memories filed away in my brain, and if that was the case, I felt like in some very real way Dylan was now dead. The guy who just slacked through life, played video games, never bothered to read anything? I remembered him the way you remember an old friend who moved away; he was someone I used to know.

That Dylan's memories had been overwritten, infected with the Kisa virus, and while some remnants remained, he was gone.

I loved reading. I loved girl punk. I was totally into feminism and strong women. If all I was were my thoughts and memories, if there was no me outside this body, there was no me. Not really.

But if I had a soul, if there was some part of me more than my memories, then that part of me remained, and I was still me. Dylan 1.0 had not been overwritten, and never would be. He'd just downloaded some new Apps.

I wanted to believe that version of the truth. I had to believe that. Because I couldn't stand the thought that I'd already and in a very real way died.

I pulled myself back to my book, but then I felt the phone buzzing. I rolled onto my side, digging into the pocket of my sweat pants and pulling out the phone, expecting to see "Dylan" on the screen, since Kisa was the only person who ever called me. But instead it read "unidentified caller."

I put the phone on silent and shoved it under Kisa's pillow, figuring it was just some slime ball telemarketer.

Charly took off her headphones and said, "Who was it?"

"Nobody," I said. "Telemarketers."

"Can I see?" Charly said. "Maybe I know the number?"

She started to get up, and I said, "No. That's okay. It was nobody."

"Let me take a look," she said, and it had the tone and manner of an order she expected to be obeyed rather than a request. She held out her expectantly.

I felt something, some warning--female intuition? And I stared at her and said, "It was nobody."

Charly seemed like she wanted to argue with me, to demand the phone, but then she just kind of shrugged and tossed her hair, going back to whatever she'd been watching.

I watched her, thinking her behavior strange, somehow not Charly, and she looked up at me and said, "I don't care. Really."

But the way she said it made me think she did so totally care. Later, we made dinner, cleaned up. I read her a story and tucked her in. Everything seemed normal, and I pretty much forgot about it until I went back to my room, and threw myself onto my bed--I mean Kisa's bed--and when I hugged my pillow I felt the phone and grabbed it, looking to see that Unidentified Caller had left a message.

I felt nervous. Anxious, I pressed 'Listen' and held the phone up to my ear. I heard crackling, and static, like the message came over an old radio and not a phone, and then a distorted monster voice spoke: "They are not who you think they are. Run. Get away. Now, before--"

And then the line went dead.

My hands shook. They are not who you think they are. I thought about Charly, and how curious she'd seemed about the call. About Chris and Nicki, and Kisa. I knew nothing about them. Nothing. What if this was all some kind of trick? Some ploy? What if they never intended to give me my body back, and this whole thing was just waiting until my brain waves synched so much with Kisa's body that I would just become her?

Looking at my phone, I pushed 'Call Back.' The phone started to ring, and ring, and ring, and then it just cut off. No chance to leave a message, to try

and contact this mysterious caller. It only seemed to deepen my sense of dread, and my mistrust of the weirdos who seemed so eager to help me.

Who were they? They had told me the Dakotas worked for the Russians, part of the Legion Unknown, but Nicki and Chris both sounded Russian! They never told me why they were supposedly so eager to protect me, and I'd been too freaked out about finding myself in Kisa's body to really stop and think, to ask the tough questions.

Now, with time and that creepy call in mind, I felt insanely unsafe. I thought about marching out to the living room and confronting Nicki and Chris, but I knew they would just tell me to go brush my hair or some other sexist bullshit. Kisa, then, but as I picked up the phone to call, I hesitated. Better not to raise their suspicions, I decided. Better to just go along with the 'plan' at least for a little while longer.

I would not put myself in danger by raising their suspicions. No. I had to play it cool.

I picked up the phone and listened to the message again, then I deleted it. I found myself pulling the pillow over my eyes and chewing on a strand of my long hair, thinking about that voice on the line. Who are you? I thought. Why are you trying to help me?

Are you trying to help me?

The wind shook our house, and the windows rattled. The branches of the tree outside the house scraped against the clapboards, sounding like skeletal fingers dragging across dry old bones. I paced in my small room, biting my thumb, trying to decide what to do. As I lay there, thinking, I got a text from Kisa: 'Anything new?'

'Nah. The usual. You?'

'Nothing. Excited about tomorrow. Football emoji.'

'Yay, you! I answered. Night.'

'Night.'

We both sent hearts, but I scrolled up to the initial post. Anything new.

Charly had told her to try and get it out of me. I was sure of it. I went and locked my door, pulled my covers over me. I wasn't safe. Had never been safe. I fell asleep clutching my phone to my chest, hoping for another phone call.

Chapter 25

I woke to the sound of Girl Ray singing Trouble:

So

I guess that I'm in trouble again

I'm in trouble, trouble, trouble

Again

I heard that I've become such a horrible thing

In a fight where nobody should win

Yeah nobody should win

No

Weirdly appropriate, I thought, searching around the covers for the phone. I saw it on Kisa's dresser and stumbled over to shut it off. Darkness engulfed our mornings now--daylight Savings time wouldn't happen for a few more weeks--and as soon as I shut off the phone the whole room vanished, and I found myself rootless in an inky black space.

Which was not the best time for me to remember I'd fallen asleep clutching the phone in my hands. I felt a rush of paranoia.

How had it gotten over to my dresser?

I suddenly had a blurry memory of Charly tugging the phone free from my fingers, hair all in my face as I wavered between sleep and consciousness.

Did that happen? Or was I just imagining it now to explain the phone's being on my dresser?

I heard the floorboards in the hall creaking as someone walked past, and I had the sudden sensation I was being watched, that they had been watching me the whole time. I looked around the room for a tiny blue or red light--there was always a tiny light in the movies, but I saw nothing.

Run! the voice had said. Get away. But I just stood there, frozen in the dark, paralyzed. Where would I run to? No one knew me. My parents would never believe me. What would I do--like this? Get a job at Hooters?

I heard a gentle knocking at my door, and Charly called, "Kisa? Can I come in?"

I did not want her to come in, but I just decided to act like everything was fine. It would seem weird if she found me standing alone in the dark, so I turned on my bedroom light and said, "Come in."

Charly came in, walked up to me and hugged my leg. "I wish you could stay with us."

I ruffled her hair, but her words sent chills through my body, and the feeling of her evil little arms around my leg made me want to kick her off me. I had this feeling that was their plan, that they meant to keep me as Kisa, and she was sounding me out, waiting for the day when I said, "Okay."

I thought about how Kisa had made friends with my mom, had gotten Cassie back. How she was worming her way into my life, taking over my life. "Wouldn't you miss the real Kisa?" I asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"I like you better," she said. "The last Kisa wouldn't read to me."

The last Kisa? I thought. Had there been more than one? "I'll stop reading to you if it makes you feel better."

"NO!" she said, grabbing at my thermal shirt, tugging on it. "Don't!"

"Okay. Let's get you some food," I said, picking her up like a sack of potatoes and carrying her to our little kitchen. She started laughing, and as I carried her I said, "Did you still want to see that number from last night?"

"No," she said, a little too quickly, but then added, also too quickly, "Or, yes. I mean, I don't care but if you want me to?"

"You know what I want?" I said.

"What?"

"Mickey Mouse pancakes!"

"Mini Mouse!"

"By your command," I said in my best Cylon voice, getting down the mixing bowl and then mix.

"Battlestar Galactica. So good," Charly said absently as she pulled her hair back into a ponytail.

True, I thought, but would a little girl really think that?

As I prepared breakfast, I realized I didn't feel well. I had thought I'd just slept poorly, stressed from the call, everything, but I had a headache and was tired, kind of like my whole body had swollen. My boobs ached. Great. Just what I needed. I smothered my pancakes in syrup, and the sugar made me feel a little better.

I got dressed in one of my usual Don't look at me because I am so not trying ensembles. Guys are such pigs. My bra felt too tight, so I took it off and adjusted the straps, struggling to fight back tears that seemed to come out of nowhere.

I shouldn't need a bra. Shouldn't be here. Shouldn't have to--I pushed my hair off my shoulder--to worry about long hair! I didn't want the Nicki and Christo see me upset, so I took deep breaths, calmed myself, plastered a smile on my face and left my room, trying my best to seem normal, though I didn't know what normal was anymore.

We got to school, and as I followed Nicki to my first class, some guy looked me over and turned to his buddy, saying, "I'd do her."

The look and the comment--it felt like a punch in the gut, but right after thinking "gross" and suffering a general sense of revulsion over my whole body, the next thought in my mind was, That's just the way guys are. Don't be such a baby.

That stopped me short. Don't be such a baby. Like I was the one with the problem. It bugged me--really bugged me--because I didn't like thinking that--believing that guys should be able to look at me like that, comment about wanting to "do me," and that if I didn't like it, I was the problem.

Patriarchy! I seethed.

I turned to the guy, searching for words, but nothing came, and his eyes dropped right down to my chest, which even with my layers of clothes still swelled out in front of me.

"Come on," Nicki said. "You makes us late."

I turned and followed, annoyed at myself, at the guy, the world. "I can't believe what that guy just about me," I said, knowing I would probably regret it.

Surprising me, Nicki answered "What he said was not so polite." But then, he added, "If you stay girl, you get used to this."

"Stay girl?" I said, my paranoia flaring up. "Why would you say that?"

"Do not let your panties roar," Nicki said. "I just mean--this happen to girl all the time. It is world way."

"Well, it shouldn't be."

"Sure, but I am betting once you are boy again, you will also say 'I do her' about the pretty girls."

"Not anymore," I said.

Later that day, I got in line at lunch to buy some green tea, and I watched in horror as Kyle walked over and got in line behind me. I had been planning my massive slam down for him since the day he'd almost kissed me, and I hid my smile, waiting for him to grab my ass again, or make some comment.

The line moved forward. Kyle did nothing. Eventually, I turned around to face him. He had his phone in his hand, tapping out something with his thumb. He didn't even seem to be aware of me. The aggravation rose up from my toes and made my eyes burn. "Hey," I finally said, my voice sounding too loud.

He casually looked up from his phone. "Oh," he said, "hey." Then, his eyes wandered right back down to his phone.

I couldn't believe it. What the hell? Just a couple days before he couldn't keep his hands off me, and now--nothing? I had all my words piled up in me, ready for me to just vomit them right into his smug little face, and he didn't even so much as look at me weird? Say something rude?

I mean, it's not like I wanted him to fondle me or call me a "Ho," because that's what I didn't - okay. I admit it. I wanted him to try and touch me or something so I could tell him off. I'd been rehearsing my speech for the last couple of days, and feeling the way I felt today, I wanted to blow up on someone.

But he just kept staring at his phone, and I got my green tea and went to my table, and I was so annoyed he hadn't tried anything.

Kyle. Ugh! I glared at him from across the cafeteria, watching him laughing with his friends. What makes him think he's so great just because he can throw a stupid pig ball really far?

My phone buzzed. I brushed a strand of my long red hair away from my face and glanced at the text from Kisa, skimming it as I looked back at--

What?

I stared at the phone. No, no, no, I thought, reading the message over and over again. No!

I texted back. 'You joking?'

I saw the '...' and waited and waited, terrified.

Bloop. The answer.

'Nope. Any day now. (Smiley Face.)'

The first message had read. 'Almost forgot. You're about to get your period. (Shrugging Smiley Face).'

I texted back. 'Switch! Back! Now!' With a volcano erupting.

She answered: 'LOL No chance. Periods are gross, babe!'

I clenched my teeth, stood up. Nicki grabbed my arm, and I screamed at him, "Don't touch me!"

That got the teacher's attention, and as they started moving toward us, Nicki let go, hissing, "Don't."

I marched right toward Kisa. She had a smug look on her face, but as I marched toward her the grin faded and she got to her feet, holding her palms toward me. "Hey. Okay! Not here."

"You asshole!" I said, picking up speed until I was almost running. "Fuck you!"

The guys started laughing. "Oooooohhhh!"

Kisa backed away, looked around for a door, an exit, but as I charged toward her suddenly Cassie appeared, stepping between us, looking totally furious. "What the hell?" she said.

"Cat Fight!" someone yelled.

I tried to push my way past Cassie, but she stayed between us, and then some female teachers stepped in, and Vice Principal Tina Brooke, who pointed at me and said, "Office! Now!"

Behind Cassie, I saw Dasha moving toward Kisa, her eyes hard, her forehead furled in concentration. Kisa seemed to wobble, and then dropped to a knee. Oh, no! I glanced back at Chris and Nick and saw that they were getting into it with Victor and Syria. I started toward Kisa again, wanting to

protect my other body, but then I felt VP Brooke grab my arm, and the Resource Officer coming into the lunch room.

"Kisa," I said, pointing to her, kneeling on the ground, holding her head.

"We'll take care of it. Come on. You need to leave. Now."

I let myself be led away, glancing back over my shoulder, wondering if Dasha had swapped, if Kisa had lost.

Chapter 26

As VP Brooke led me to the office, I found myself crying uncontrollably. "Sit," she said, indicating a plastic chair in the "Doom Room," the waiting room where bad kids went to await their sentence. I had never been there. Football players don't get in trouble. Ever.

The secretary handed me some tissues and I dried my tears. The thought crossed my mind to tell VP Brooke I was having my period, to see if I could get some pity points, but I was too embarrassed to even say the word period, let alone in conjunction with the word my.

In the meantime, I checked my phone. Texted Chris and Nicki. Kisa. No one replied. I tried to remember Cassie's number so I could text her, but I'd put it in my phone so long ago I couldn't remember it at all.

I looked at the clock. Lunch period-- why did they have to call them periods? Lunch period was over, so I guessed everyone had gone back to class. No one else was here, so that meant no one else had gotten into trouble.

The nurse's little clinic was right next door to the doom room. I wanted to take a look, see if anyone was in there, but when I glanced at VP Brooke, sitting at her desk on the phone, separated from me only by a pane of glistening glass, she glared at me. Not wanting to get into any more trouble, I sat there dabbing my tears, my knees together, and tried not to think about the gross and disgusting things that were going on in this body, and what would be resulting pretty soon.

I had some vague memory from sex ed class, of seeing a diagram of the female reproductive system; tubes and stuff. I remembered saying it reminded me of some kind of alien mushroom, which me and the guys had all thought was very funny.

That was all I remembered. I saw these little plastic things in the bathroom sometime, or the wrappers from my sister's -- whatever. It always grossed me out, made me very uncomfortable. Even the sight of the box made me laugh but also feel gross.

No way, I decided. There is no way I am going to -- that word. Never. I would find a way to jump into Chris, or back into me. Something. But I am a dude, and I am not going to - that.

My legal guardian arrived--Nicki? He walked by me without acknowledging me, his face dark and angry. VP Brooke closed her office door. I couldn't hear anything, but I closed my eyes and tried to reach out, see if I could swap into Nicki. But, no. Nothing. I felt repulsed at the idea, didn't want him in my head, getting pieces of me. One thing for sure; you can't swap into someone if you find the thought of them being forever intertwined with you repulsive, or at least I couldn't.

After only a few moments, Nicki came out looking grim. VP Brooke followed along behind, "After school detention," she said. "Two days starting Monday."

I nodded.

"Let's go," Nicki said.

There was still a period and a half open, so I had to go back to class. I knew Nicki wanted to say something, to give me some shit, but he couldn't say much right there in school. When he left me at the door to my class, he just hissed, "Don't do anything. You are making it worse."

I just nodded and went into class. If your God is whatever you think about the most, my God had just become my-- you know. I couldn't stop thinking about, imagining having blood come out of me, leaking out of me.

I tried to think of something else, but my mind just kept obsessing about-- that. Imagined my dad, what he would think, what everyone would think. What would my team mates think of me if they found out I was on the rag? I felt dirty, unclean, but if there was a good side I felt more than ever that this was not my body.

It hadn't even started yet, but I felt like everyone in that class room could tell, that they all knew I was about to-. I burned with shame, self-consciousness, humiliation, and a smoldering rage at the injustice of it all.

Why me? I wondered again. What did I do to deserve this?

The bell rang, and I walked out of the room, thought about bolting, running, but then waited for Nicki, my guardian, who walked me to gym. I figured I would just bail again, especially considering my condition, but then I saw Kyle swaggering along, talking to some guys from the team. He saw me, let his eyes wander over my body, and smiled at me.

My smoldering rage ignited and turned into a huge, blazing bonfire. I remembered how Kyle had grabbed me, talked down to me, then ignored me. He walked over, looked down at me and said, "You look good."

For some reason I said, "thanks," and cursed myself for it.

But then he said, "You looked better yesterday," and walked into the boy's locker room.

He's negging me, I realized. That shit is actually negging me. My hate and anger now brought a smile to my face. I wanted him in this body. I wanted him to have my period.

I went into the girl's locker room, keeping my eyes down, determined not to be a creep. I found Kisa's locker and searched around in my brain, finding the combination. I reached back and unhooked my bra, feeling the weight of my breasts swing free, pulling on my collarbone. If I can pull this off Kyle will be the one wearing a bra, I thought, smiling. Let him deal with all the bouncing.

I didn't look, but pulled on a sports bra, a pair of yoga pants. I threw on a loose fitting tank top as well, with a plunging neckline that showed off my cleavage. My rage overcame my embarrassment over being a girl, having cleavage. I needed to get out of this body.

I walked into the weight room, and for a second my bravado wavered. There were all these big guys there, and I felt small and very female, but I just walked right in, grabbed Kyle's arm and said, "Can I have a sec?"

"Sure," he said in a booming voice. Kisa hadn't come out of the locker room yet, so I wanted to get Kyle alone, away before she came out and interfered. Kyle followed me out to the hallway. I could feel his eyes roaming over me, and I smiled thinking, "Enjoy the view, pig. You'll be the view soon enough."

I found myself in a corner. Kyle put his arms on the wall to either side of me, pinning me in. I realized I had no idea what to say or do. My heart started to race. Remembering my times with Cassie, I put my hand on his bicep and looked into his eyes, making my voice small. "Are you mad at me or something?"

He looked down at the swelling of my chest, rubbed the back of his hand across my smooth cheek. I felt the energy start to build between us, and I didn't fight it, but reached out, and I started to both pull him out and push myself in.

"I could never be mad at you," he said, his eyes still on my chest while he now started to brush my hair back from my face. "But the thing is, babe, the thing is--"

I was looking down at his pretty, smooth face, and I saw those big green eyes widen in shock. He looked down at himself, then up at me. "What?" he looked scared, and some cruel part of me liked that.

I felt big, strong, tall. It felt good to be a dude again. "Gotta go, babe," I said, wanting to get away, to leave him like that before we flickered back. I

could feel it within me, an almost instant sense of discomfort at this new body, an impulse to go back to what I knew, even if it had only been for a few days.

"No!" I heard Kyle cry out, his little voice cracking, but as I turned I found myself looking right at Kisa, standing there looking annoyed. I Kaleidoscoped big time, the pieces of me breaking apart, swirling, and then I was a girl again, and it was my turn to cry out "No!" in a desperate, high-pitched voice.

Kyle wavered, and Kisa steadied him. "You okay, bro?" she said in my deep voice.

"Yeah. He looked at me, at himself. I was sure his mind was already dismissing what had just happened, telling him it was impossible. "I think that concussion is still messing with me. I'm going to go sit down."

"Cool."

He left. Kisa looked at me, a look that actually scared me, and I shrank away. "Sorry?" I whispered. I was going to run back into the weight room, but Kisa grabbed my elbow and led me out the door, to the back school porch and the cold, Fall air, which brought goose bumps to my bare arms.

"Help me understand," she said, rubbing her stubbled chin. "I don't know what you think you're doing."

I reached out for her mind, trying to take my body back, to seize it, to reclaim what was mine, but her will was strong and it was like trying to punch through a stone wall with a feather.

"Just stop," she said.

The tears came, pouring down my cheeks, and my mouth trembled, and I felt my whole body shaking with sobs. "That's my body," I said. "I want it back! I want it back! I want it..."

My voice trailed off, and to my surprise I felt Kisa take me in her arms and hug me to her, covering me in her body. I tried to push her away but she held me tight, and I finally stopped fighting and just nuzzled into her, crying myself out, and when I at last stopped crying she took me by the shoulders and held me at arm's length.

"I care about you," she said, deepening her voice.

"Then give me my body back."

"You have to trust me, Kisa. If I give it back to you now, you'll just lose it again to Dasha."

"I don't care," I said. "Just put me back."

"Come," Kisa said, putting her hand in the small of my back and guiding me to a spot under an oak tree, the same one I'd sat under reading when I'd first become her, what seemed like forever ago.

I was freezing but I didn't want to admit it. Kisa saw me shivering, and when we sat under the tree, she pulled me to her. I tried to pull away, again, but she said, "Just for warmth."

"It's my own warmth you're offering me."

"I know. Come on."

"No," I said, moving away. "No, and you have one minute to give me some reason to stay here."

"I need you to trust me, Kisa."

"Give me a reason," I said, the Fall breeze ripe with the smell of dry, fallen leaves, and tossed my hair. I reached up and fiddled with my hair tie. "All you've given me so far are vague empty promises."

"What if Dasha gets into your head? I can't tell you..."

I started to get to my feet. Kisa grabbed my wrist. "I will scream," I said.

"Come on," she said. "I'm your only option. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to go to Dasha and tell her the whole thing. Maybe she'll offer more than bullshit."

"You can't. She wants to steal your body. I told you--"

"You actually did steal my body. Remember, babe?"

"You're bluffing."

"No, I'm desperate," I said, pulling my arm free. "I'm a sixteen-year-old boy about to have his first period, and I am not in the mood for any more bullshit." I started to walk away.

"Tonight," Kisa said. "We'll fix it all tonight. After the game."

"How?"

"Dasha's been wanting to meet up with me. I'll set it up, and we'll ambush her, lure her into a swap, but we'll all end up in your own bodies."

"Just like that?"

"Are you giving me a choice?"

"No."

"Then we'll have to make it happen then, won't we. Kisa?"

I turned back to him. "You won't get another chance. And my name is Dylan."

CHAPTER 27

School ended, and by the time I met Nicki outside the weight room Kisa had already texted him. "This could all go wrong," he said. "You should have been patient."

"I was patient," I said. My phone rumbled. I looked at it. A message from Kisa: Put on a pad. You could start leaking.

I texted back: Fuck you.

Trying to help.

When we got home, I went into my room and lay on my bed, reading. I didn't want to think about what was going on with my body. After a while, I got curious and wondered where Kisa kept her stuff for girl troubles. I looked around her room, then went to the bathroom and looked under the sink, seeing a box there that read Tampax.

The sight of it made me queasy, and I went back to my room, deciding I would just have to hope I didn't spring a leak. I don't know why guys are so grossed out by periods and anything to do with them, but it bordered on a phobia with me, like something that would bring on a full on freak out, and I couldn't bring myself to even touch one of those things let alone wear one. A shudder rippled through me just from the thought.

I went to the game, escorted closely by Nicki. I don't know where the others were. We found a place in the stands. I saw Hester. Hester? At a football game? I waved her over, and she came, giving me a hug.

"I thought you considered football a stupid throwback to caveman days?" I said, remembering something she'd said to me when I was still a boy.

"I do," she answered, not seeming to notice my faux pas. "But my little brother is playing tonight, so I thought I would come and cheer him on."

"That's--great," I said, surprised and touched. "You're a good sister."

"You aren't," Nicki grumbled.

I ignored him, and talked to my sister for a little more, before she returned to sit with my parents, my little brother. I couldn't believe my family had actually come out to cheer me on. I don't think my father had come to one of my games since 8th grade. And now here they all were. I looked over and got that lonely feeling again, like there was a wall around them, these people I'd known all my life and yet never known at all.

I wondered if they had all just come to see Kisa, because she was doing such a better job of being me? Well, I would do a better job of being me, too, after tonight. I would.

"It's off," Nicki said. "I'm going to get a hot dog."

He started to get up. "Wait. What's off?"

"The ambush," he said.

"No. It can't be. I can't stay like this. Kisa promised."

"Dasha doesn't agree to meet," Nicki said, leaning in close to my ear.
"Now, be quiet."

He walked away. I watched him go, feeling empty. Tired. Hungry. "Get me something, too!" I shouted.

"Yes, yes."

The band finishing honking its way through another horrific rendering of The Star-Spangled Banner, but one that did at least capture the drunken bar room vibe of the original. The cheerleaders gathered near one of the end zones, raising a big banner they'd painted with a picture of a Juggernaut and the words Go Team! The team ran through the banner, ripping it to shreds, as the principal fired his canon and the crowd roared.

I just sat there, numb. Maybe in shock.

Kisa jumped and raised her arms, urging the crowd to get louder, louder... and they did. It brought a little smile to my face, and also a lot of bitterness. That was supposed to be me, and yet as I watched her I didn't feel like that body was me anymore. Even that life seemed more like a dream.

Nicki came back with a couple of paper trays piled with food. He handed me one with a hot dog, a hamburger, onion rings and a box of Raisinettes plus a large Coke. The food steamed in the cool Fall air, and it smelled like grease. "I'll never be able to eat all this," I said, taking the paper tray and putting it on my lap.

Nicki just shrugged and stuffed his burger into his mouth.

The game started. On the first series we ran twice, and on third down Kisa missed a wide open receiver. Not as easy as you'd thought! I swallowed down the last of the hot dog and started on the onion rings.

By the middle of the second quarter, my gloating had been replaced as Kisa played really well, leading us to 17-10, throwing and running for a touchdown. She looked sharp, quick and strong. Meanwhile, I tossed the last of the chocolate covered raisins into my mouth and held them there, letting the chocolate dissolve and turn to liquid. I swished it around in my mouth, feeling the raisins against my tongue and cheeks, getting soft, and then I chewed it all up and swallowed it down. Chocolate had never tasted so good. "Oh, my God," I said, patting my belly, looking at the now empty paper tray. "I can't believe I ate all that!"

Nicki chuckled. "I can."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He leaned close and whispered, "Having period makes hungry."

"Shut up," I said, pushing him away.

He chuckled.

We stayed until midway through the fourth quarter. Kisa kept playing great, and we were ahead

31-13. I started thinking about seeing him after the game getting congratulated by my Dad, my Mom, my whole family. I pictured myself standing off to the side, small and irrelevant, as the team took a knee in a

circle and prayed. I saw him and Cassie, hugging, staring into each other's eyes. It all seemed like a major suck fest for me, so I turned to Nicki and said, "Wanna go?"

"Yeah, since one hours ago."

On the way back to the van, I asked him, "When?"

"I don't know," he said. "Gots to get the animal to come to the trap."

"They must know," I said. "That's why they aren't falling for it."

"I think if they knew, they would come for you now in this body. They stay away, though. So, that's good."

"What's so special about me that they're going to all this trouble?"

"That information, it can't be given to you."

"Please?" I said. "I've tried threatening, complaining, but won't you please just tell me something? Anything?"

"No," he said. "And if you run to Dasha, you get what you deserve."

CHAPTER 28

My "flow" came on Saturday, and I had no choice but to finally just read the Tampax box, take one of those little mini-diapers and... slip it between my legs. I hated the way it felt, having something stuck there between my legs, and I hated what it meant. I moped in bed all day, ate a lot of terrible food, had a random cry. I felt this was the ultimate blow to whatever sense I had of myself as a man.

Everyone left me alone. They knew what was happening and stayed clear, which made me feel even more like I had the plague, like I was some kind of gross, dirty pig that had to be locked away and kept from humanity.

I finished *Wuthering Heights* and ugly-cried, and then slept. After, I started looking through the piles of books on the floor for something new to read. The cramps weren't too bad, for which I was grateful, but that I was suffering menstrual cramps at all inflamed my rage at the Tiresians and Kisa, and as I pictured her being all boy, swaggering around in my body, my rage toward her and all males built--and then vanished. And then came back.

There was so much I didn't even want to think about. That night, Nicki knocked on my door and said, "When will you cook dinner?"

I launched myself off my bed, ran to my door ready to claw his face off, but when I swung the door open he stood there holding a bag from White Castle, grease stains forming at the bottom of the white bag. I froze. "Oh," I said, dropping my fists.

"You should see your face. Eats this! You feel terrible after!"

I ate it. I felt terrible, and I never felt better.

On Sunday I woke up feeling less tired, and I started to think about my situation once more. Had Dasha really ruined the plan? I replayed my encounter with Kisa over in my head. Had she been too eager to agree?

But I had threatened to go to Dasha, and I'd meant it. Maybe she'd just heard the determination in my voice?

Which made me think of that call. The monster voice: They aren't who you think they are. What if this was another trick? But the location. The football stadium after the game. If they wanted to do something to me, trick me or something, why not just do it in their shack?

I needed more info. I needed to take action.

I went and found Charly. "Want to hang out in my room?" I said.

"Sure," she said, with a shrug.

She's set up her own little corner in my room with her favorite books and dolls plus her smart pad and Lady Bug headphones. I climbed onto my bed and cracked open *Wuthering Heights*, and after waiting just a moment I said, "Charly?"

She looked up. "Yes?"

"I'm scared."

Charley immediately got up, climbed onto the bed and touched my hair, my face. "It's going to be okay, I think?" She said.

"But, I don't know anything about you people. Who are you? Why do you want to help me?"

Charley's eyes dropped to the side. "Um, well, the Dakotas are from the Army of the Invisible, so we have to stop them?"

"Why? Who are you with?"

Charley shrugged. "I'm just a little kid?"

I put my hands on her shoulders and said, "Look at me."

She slowly raised her eyes, and I could see the conflict in them, the struggle.

"Are you my friend? Do you really care about me?"

"Of course!" she said.

"Then tell me. Who are you?"

"I can't," she said, trying to pull away from me.

It hurt me to be mean to her, but I tightened my grip on her shoulders, digging my fingers into the soft skin. "What are you hiding from me? Tell me the plan!"

"I don't know... you're hurting me!"

"Who are you?!" I hissed, leaning in so close our noses almost touched.
"Tell me who you are!"

Charly's eyes hardened, and her innocent little kid demeanor melted away, replaced by something hard and angry. "You have no idea who you're messing with," she answered, lowering her voice. "Don't make me hurt you."

"Funny, I was just thinking the same-"

But just then the door slammed open, and Nicki stood there, fists clenched.
"Let her go," he said in a dead calm voice.

I took my hands off Charly, and she jumped off the bed and backed away into the corner. "Someone must have warned her," she said, now with a slight Russian accent. "Take care of this."

"I takes the care," Nicki said.

Charly nodded, scampering from the room, squeezing past Nicki. I heard the door to her room slam shut.

"What the hell is going on?" I said. "Who are you people?"

Nicki shook his head. "The less you know, the safer you will be. Curiosity-- this is what kills the kitten. Trust us. Do what we say. Tonight, you go back to being you."

"How can I trust you if I don't know anything about you?"

Nicki sighed. "Then don't trusts me. I don't care. But if you want to be you again, just stay in your room and don't get in the way."

With that, he slammed the door.

I stared at the door, seething. Stay here? No way. I wished I had my truck. If only--

My phone buzzed. I had dropped it face down on my bed, so I could see the light from the screen flickering at the edges of the phone as it shook. I reached toward it, afraid but desperate to know who was calling, and picking up the phone I saw "Unidentified Caller" flashing between an unfamiliar number with no location identified. I swiped right, holding the phone to my ear and huddling in the corner away from the door, so no one would hear me talking, "Who is this?" I whispered.

"You need to get out now," the monster voice answered.

It sounded like the same voice as before, and I put my fingers to my lips. "I can't, I--"

"Open the window. Climb out. A car will pick you up and take you to safety."

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"Do as I say," the voice demanded. "Or I have no choice but to leave you to your fate."

I heard footsteps in the hallway. I ran over and locked the door, then looked to the window, to the door to my room. What should I do? I didn't know who any of these people were, or what they wanted.

The handle to my door rattled. "Open up," I heard Chris say.

"We need to talk," Charly added. It was her voice, but the little girl cadences were gone, replaced by a harsh, Russian winter of an accent.

"I am leaving in thirty seconds with or without you," the voice said over my phone.

I had to do something, so I called out, "I'm changing! One second."

I went to the window and pulled. It didn't budge. I started to curse my weak girl arms, but then I saw the latch was closed, and unlocking the window, I shoved it open, the old, paint encrusted window frame making a grinding noise.

"Open the door!" Charly shouted, and then they started pounding on it, hard.

I hopped out the window, landing on my feet in the tall grass, and then I saw headlights flash on the street-- and I turned and ran toward them even as I heard the door to my room crash open.

"Hey! Come back!" Chris shouted.

"Get her! Now!" Charly shouted. "Do not let her escape!"

I ran then, harder than I ever remember running. Hopping over an old, rusty tricycle, a couple paint cans.... Looking back, I saw Chris jump out of the window and start racing after me.

I yelped, running as fast as I could, even as Nicki burst out the front door and raced toward me as well. Ahead I could now make out the car--sleek and black, a Maserati with tinted windows. The passenger door swung open. I could hear the footsteps of the Chris stomping along behind me, getting closer, and Nicki had taken a good angle. He would cut me off from the car.

Come on, I thought. Get out. Help me.

But no one stirred from inside the car, and I knew I was on my own. As Nicki closed in, his eyes glassy with rage, I decided to surprise him, and instead of trying to dodge him or make it to the car, at the last second I turned and barrel rolled into his legs. Years of drills rolling and getting right back up on my feet paid off, and as Nicki tumbled to the ground, I popped right back up to my feet, dove into the car and yanked the door shut, hearing all the locks click just as Chris slammed against the window, pounding and yelling in Russian, jerking on the handle.

I looked to see who was driving the car, the source of the mysterious voice, and it was-- "Kisa?" I said.

"Buckle up," he said as he popped the clutch and stepped on the gas pedal. The car lurched forward, tires squealing, the g-forces shoving me back into the soft leather seat. I pulled the hair out of my face and glanced in the rearview mirror.

Nicki and Chris watched, hands on their knees, gasping for breath. Next to them Charly stood wearing a headset, talking calmly as she watched us disappear into the night.

Chapter 28

"What the hell is going on?" I asked.

"Seat belt," Kisa said. I noticed she had a toothpick clenched in her teeth.

I ignored her. "Tell me what the heck is--"

I found myself thrown to the side, my head banging against the window as Kisa slammed on the brakes and made a hairpin turn. I heard and then saw a pair of Harley Davidson motorcycles tear past us and then slam on their brakes, skidding into a turn as they gunned the engines and remained in pursuit.

"Seat belt," Kisa said again, eyes focused on the road.

I grabbed the seat belt and yanked it on--I wiggled uncomfortably, then braced myself against the dashboard as we once again careened around a corner, then exploded into traffic on Highway 36--a six lane road that ran along the shore towns scattered along the Raritan Bay and toward the Atlantic Ocean.

Kisa floored it, and the car leapt into traffic. She wove in and around the cars and trucks, and I found my heart in my throat as we skimmed past the muddled mess of Yugos, Hondas, Chevys and Dodge mini-vans, each time missing a collision by inches, and leaving a wake of honking, cursing, obscene gesture making drivers in our wake.

"Slow down!" I yelled over the buzz of our engine, the squeal of our tires and the blasting horns of shocked drivers.

"Can't," Kisa said. "They're gaining."

Pulling my hair out of my face, I looked back to see two bearded freaks with skull caps riding their heavy metal Harleys, rocketing through the traffic and gaining fast, grinning to show off their jagged, steel teeth.

"What the hell are they?"

"Morons," Kisa said. She jerked the wheel and we darted into the far-left lane, zipping onto the grass shoulder to pass a beat-up VW Mini-Van covered in childish paintings of pot leaves and sun flowers. As we passed I saw the driver just sort of nodding in a blissed-out haze, a joint dangling from her lips.

As the bearded freaks closed in, Kisa gunned it and blasted back to the left, crossing all three lanes and then flashing off 36 and onto an off ramp. I found myself thrown around the car again, and looking back I saw the Harleys disappear, unable to match our three-lane cut across.

Kisa slowed, and we made a couple turns down narrow local roads before finally pulling up behind a Quick Stop which I looked at, curious. 'Isn't this?'

"Yeah. From Clerks," Kisa said.

He climbed out of the car, slamming the door. I fumbled awkwardly with the handle on the passenger side, but couldn't get the door open. Kisa came to the door and stood there looking down at me with an 'are you kidding me?' look on his face.

I shrug, feeling ridiculous and a little--to be honest--girly, a feeling which only grew stronger when he opened the door and reached down to grab my hand and help me up. I took his hand and let him help me up, and then froze when he put his hand on the small of my back and said, "You okay?"

"Yeah," I said, my voice slipping up into a slightly higher pitch.

I still didn't trust him, but he'd rescued me from Nicki and Charly, and the way he'd driven that car had left me feeling light-headed, my heart fluttering.

A tall, muscular Indian kid came around the corner. Kisa tossed him the keys. "You followed?"

"Lost 'em on 36," Kisa said, "but they're probably still in the area. Lead 'em away."

"Got it." He jumped in the car and as we walked around to the front of the store I saw him drive off.

Kisa had kept his hand on the small of my back and sort of steered me, but I found the physical contact and the clear guy/girl dynamic increasingly uncomfortable. I stepped away and said, "No offense, but, um...?"

"I get it," Kisa said.

We walked into the store, the bell above the door ringing. A bored looking kid read a copy of the Daily News. He barely nodded as we walked to the back, passed through a door and went downstairs to the basement, a space crowded with flat screens and massive bundles of cable, blinking lights and computer towers. In one corner there was even a machine with big reels of magnetic tape rotating like something from an old science fiction movie.

In the center were some old office chairs--torn and patched green pleather, on rusty metal frames. "Take a seat," Kisa said.

"I'm good," I answered, crossing my arms. "What the hell's going on?"

"Just give me a second to calm down, collect my thoughts. I need some Monster. You?"

"Sure," I said, rolling my eyes. "Fine."

"What flavor?"

"I don't care! Just get it, please, and then tell me what's happening."

"Okay," he said. "Jeez. Fine."

He headed back toward the stairs, and I relented. "Wait," I said. "Get me that lemonade one?"

"You got it."

As he left, I looked around the room at all the monitors and computers. Grabbing a mouse, I moved it around until the screen saver disappeared and the Desktop appeared. I clicked on "Documents" but a password request box popped up. I bit my lip, then double-clicked on Chrome, watching as the window opened. Shrugging, I checked History.

My mouth went dry as I looked at the list of names-- all of my family members: my mom, dad, sisters, even my Uncle and cousins. They'd looked at our Facebook pages, Instagrams, school websites, Snapchats. Now, this was too much, and the thought that my whole family might be in danger focused my rage.

I heard the door at the top of the stairs open, Kisa's heavy footsteps thudding on the steps. I thought about hiding what I'd just found, but instead I took a position next to the monitor and put my hands on my hips, legs spread. Kisa had the cans of Monster in her arms as well as a couple boxes of Pop Tarts.

Still, I had to stick to my guns, and I said, "Want to tell me why you've been spying on my whole family?"

Kisa looked at the screens. "Okay, sure" she said. "We were planning on stealing their lives."

Chapter 29

"What?" I grabbed the can of lemonade Monster and cracked it open, the pop and fizz alone gave me a jolt of energy as my body anticipated the coming chemical rush.

"Yup. We were going to steal their bodies and set up shop here in the burbs."

"So, who are you? Who is this "we?"

"We are Agency Naught. A secret federal government agency aimed at combating foreign brain swappers. Or, that was supposed to be our mission."

The door at the top of the stairs creaked open, a column of lights pouring down the stairs. "Get back," Kisa said, gesturing for me to move away.

"Who is it?" I hissed.

"Just get back."

But then we saw it was just the burned-out looking guy from upstairs. "I just locked up," he said. "So we could talk."

"Who are you?" I said.

"This is Lenny," Kisa said.

"My name's Katie," he said sourly.

"You're a girl?" I asked.

"Used to be."

"Lenny," Kisa said. "Could you maybe give us some time? I'm trying to explain--"

"No. Let her stay," I said, thinking that Kisa wouldn't be able to lie as easily with another person here, particularly one who was giving off a hostile vibe.

"Fine.Okay," Kisa said. "Whatever."

"You want to switch bodies?" Katie said, kind of looking me over, but not like a guy did. More like a girl might look at a dress. "I am so sick of being a dude."

I looked at her--at "Lenny." He had deep, angry red pock marks all over his face from brutal, untreated acne, a weak chin and a thinning head of patchy, balding hair that looked like it belonged to a 50-year-old man. His

whole body was just bones - he was scrawny and seemed to have a slight hunch back, or at least really crap posture. Then she, he--smiled, revealing yellow, crooked teeth.

Much to my surprise, I realized I so totally would rather be a healthy girl and not a crappy looking loser. I mean--what if I was stuck as some snaggle-toothed goon? At one time, I think I believed that any guy's body was better than a girl's, but no. I shook my head. "Wow," I said. "Um, I totally appreciate the offer and everything, but Kisa is right? We need to focus on other priorities? Right now? And stuff?"

Katie chuckled. "This is a pretty sad looking shell, isn't it?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "It's just not ideal for me. Plus, anyway, my real body is right here."

"I got to get out of this thing," she murmured sinking into one of the pleather office chairs.

"Why can't we switch back right now?" I said to Kisa, the thought finally occurring to me.

"So, where were we, again?" Kisa said.

"Agency Naught," I said, "but let's just switch back?"

Kisa started to say something, then sighed. "Okay. Fine. Take my hands, and look into my eyes."

I took his hands and looked into his eyes. Green with specs of chestnut, Cassie had always told me I had pretty eyes, but I had never really thought much of it. Now, staring into them, I could really see how pretty they were. I felt a kind of tugging at my brain, a pulling, but eventually Kisa just let go of my hands and turned away, saying, "I can't do it!"

"Why not?" I said, feeling frustrated.

"I told you before I haven't really mastered my powers. I can't do it whenever I feel like it."

"You did it before!"

"That's because we were making out," he said. "I mean, do you want to...?"

"Make out with myself?"

"Maybe it wouldn't be so bad?" Kisa said.

'Just--gross. Stop. Whatever. Fine. We'll do it later. Tell me about Agency Naught. So, Nicki and Chris? Federal Agents? Really? All they did was play video games all the time. How do you explain that?"

"We have a union," Kisa said.

"Oh. Very funny. Stop with the bullshit!"

"They were undercover. What did you think they would do all day? Profile serial killers?"

"Well, what about Charly? What is her deal?"

"That's a long story," Katie said, coughing into her fist. "A very long story. But the short version-- she is actually a high-ranking officer in the agency, and the lead agent on the plan to steal your family."

"She's not really a little kid?"

"Not at all."

"But the playing with dolls and all that stuff?"

"Synching with the body. Just like you've been doing. Just like I've been doing. Trust me. She is a ruthless and highly trained secret agent. Do not doubt her skills. She directed the whole operation."

Kisa's words left my head spinning. Every new piece of information just brought me more questions. "But, why me? I know I'm a swapper, but this all seems like a crazy amount of resources for just one person."

"What you don't know, is that you show some of the greatest potential of any swapper we've discovered. You, me, all people, really, are mentally cloud computers. This is part of what Jung was onto when he talked about a Collective Unconscious. We have tools that can spot potential, and your potential could be seen from Jupiter."

"So, you did want me?"

"Yeah. The Agency wanted you."

"So, why are we here? Why pull me away from the shack? Nicki and Chris and Charly?"

"Ah, and that is--"

But just then, the lights flickered, a deep horn sounded, shaking the whole room, and red lights began to flash as a robotic voice intoned "Warning! Warning! Enemy agents closing in!"

Chapter 30

Kisa grabbed my hand and dragged me to my feet. "Let go," I said, struggling to pull myself free.

"We need to move. Now!" He bellowed, pulling me back toward the rear of the basement.

"I got you covered," Katie said, charging up the stairs. "Get out of here!"

Kisa led me to a ramp, where a sleek Asian motorcycle waited, and he tossed me a helmet even while he pushed a button that caused the metal doors covering the ramp to pop open.

Not knowing what else to do, but wanting to stay as close to my body as possible, I pulled on the helmet and climbed onto the bike behind Kisa, wrapping my arms around his waist and holding tight as the bike rocketed into motion, flying out of the loading bay and into the warm, golden glow of the setting sun.

We bolted out of the driveway and back onto Highway 36, zipping in and out of cars. My heart pounded, and I hugged Kisa tight. Glancing back, I didn't see any pursuit.

We blasted all the way down Highway 36 and then up and over the bridge to Sandy Hook, zipping down the roads until we came to some tall sand dunes covered in spiky grass and small, purple flowers. Kisa pulled the bike around behind the dunes, and it sputtered to silence.

"Get down," he said, pulling off his helmet. "They might still be following us."

I pulled mine off as well. "I didn't see anyone following us," I said, shaking out my long hair, dropping the helmet to the ground.

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I think you're still lying to me."

"You say I'm lying?"

"Yes. I do."

"Come on, then." He started climbing the dune. "Come on!"

I followed, climbing up. He lay on his belly when we neared the top of the dune and hissed, "Get down!"

I plopped to my belly, feeling my breasts crush against the sand, just as I saw two Harleys come around the bend. As they approached and then blasted by us, I saw the bearded freaks, and immediately I felt like a total idiot.

"Oh," I said.

'Yeah. Oh," Kisa said. "You ready to start believing me now?"

"Okay," I said. "I guess so."

The sun was setting behind us, and the gentle waves had turned orange and red, reflecting thin wisps of cloud that blazed in the setting sun. The moon had made an early appearance, hovering just above the horizon, pale and white and lonely against the deep blue dusky sky.

Kisa brushed my long hair back from my face, then put her hand on my cheek. "I threw everything away for you. For your family. Everything. I didn't do that on a lark or an impulse, understand? Just stop fighting this, and believe in me."

There was something in his eyes, his voice. I felt myself melting. He'd done all this for me? And all I'd done was complain and undermine. I covered his hand with mine and said, "I'm sorry."

"Let me save you. Please."

Let me save you. The words, they made my head swim, and my heart flutter. "Okay," I said. "I will."

He got that look again, like he wanted to kiss me, and this time I didn't have the strength to fight it. I almost felt like I owed it to him. He leaned in, cupping my face, his fingertips against my soft skin, and I closed my eyes, putting my hand on his chest, and I could feel his breath against my face as our mouths neared, and there was a feeling like electricity. I held my breath, waiting, savoring the moment--

--but then we heard it--the Harley roar--and Kisa grabbed my hand, and we crawled down the side of the dune together. He pulled me close and put his arm around my shoulder, and we huddled together as the noise grew louder and louder, then started to move away.

We looked at each other and smiled, but then the rumbling stopped, and started getting closer again. We heard the grumbling of their idling engines, off to the right. Closer. Closer. A rumbling heavy metal growl, like a tiger or a puma, with an occasional snarl, as if they were revving their engines, only it didn't sound right. I thought I only heard one engine now, and started to say something, but when I went to speak Kisa covered my mouth with his rough, calloused hand.

Closer. Closer. Off to the right. So close I pictured the bearded freak just to the other side of the sand dune, about to come around.

Kisa grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet, and we started to the left. I guess she meant to run, to circle around, leading the freaks in a circle, but

as we rounded the sand dune we stopped short. One of the two bearded freaks sat there on his bike, the engine not running, grinning, his steel teeth glittering in the setting sun. The other one gunned his engine and came around from the right, a rooster tail of sand flying in the air.

"Give us the girl," the one sitting in front of us said, his voice sounding hoarse from cigarettes and whisky. The other one snickered, gunned his engine.

"Never," I said, but the two freaks just laughed.

"You are the girl," Kisa said to me, then turned to them and said, "Come and get her."

"What?" I said, misunderstanding, but then she pushed me back and I fell on my butt in the sand, my hair falling into my face.

"Stay back," Kisa said. "I got this."

I froze, sitting there with my knees together, pulling my long hair back from my eyes. The bearded freaks climbed off their bikes and started to circle Kisa, who'd dropped into a martial arts stance. The sun had sunk below the horizon, and a cool breeze followed the darkness as it swallowed the beach.

One of the freaks lunged, only to receive a vicious kick to the belly that sent him stumbling backwards. The other hurled himself at Kisa, and I screamed, "Watch out!" But Kisa dropped low and did some kind of sweep kick that knocked the freak off his feet. From there Kisa went crazy, like the

Karate Kid on crack, spinning, kicking, karate chopping, moving so fast the freaks didn't seem to have a chance.

Then, I, well, I kinda messed it up. Sitting there and watching I felt way too much like I was playing the girl, and not even a modern girl, but a girl from some boring old movie. I wanted to get in on the action, so I got to my feet and started coming up behind one, thinking to kick him in the back of the knee, because I knew my legs were still pretty strong even if I did have girl arms.

"I got this!" Kisa said, delivering a series of punches to the other one's face, which ripped away, revealing wires and turning gears. "Stay back!"

The sight of the gears caused me to hesitate as I realized he was fighting robots, and in what seemed like half a second, the bearded freak I'd been about to kick had grabbed me and locked my arms behind my back. I screamed in pain.

Kisa smashed the other one hard, twisting his head half off and sending him crashing to the ground in a shower of sparks and grinding gears. "Let her go!" He said, his voice calm but dripping with malice.

"Make one move, and I'll break her neck," bearded freak responded.

I struggled, making a small whimpering sound as he jacked my arm further back, sending pain shooting through my shoulder.

Kisa smiled. "You can't kill her. Acquiring her is your mission."

"I need her essence. Not her body. Get on the ground. Now." He twisted my arm again, and I screamed in pain.

"Okay. Okay," Kisa said, holding her palms out, dropping to her knees.

"Face down," bearded freak said.

Kisa looked at me, and I could see the anguish in her eyes. She really cared for me. I realized it in that moment, and the realization filled me with a cold, hard determination.

As soon as Kisa lay prostrate on the sand, bearded freak loosened his hold on me. I decided I had to try something, so I stomped down hard on his foot, as hard as I could, then I elbowed him in the stomach and--

I screamed as he grabbed a fistful of my long and yanked me off my feet, then punched me hard in the side and tossed me across the sand. I landed oddly on my left foot, rolling my ankle, and then I tumbled across the sand, hitting my head hard on a hunk of sandstone. I lay there, blinking back stars, but the distraction had been enough, and Kisa proceeded to batter the bearded freak into pieces, eventually smashing his head apart on the gas tank of his Harley.

"Are you okay?" Kisa said. "Oh my God. You're bleeding."

She helped me up, but when I tried to put weight on my left foot I hissed with pain. Kisa looked at me. "Please don't," I said. "I feel ridiculous enough--"

But before I could even finish she'd swept me off my feet, cradled me in her arms and carried me to the motorcycle. I have to admit-- it was actually a pretty awesome feeling being carried like that, especially by a guy who'd just pretty much beaten the hell out of two evil robots to save me, and as I clung to him, there in his arms, I felt like a girl, and I am a little embarrassed to admit something: I didn't mind it.

Chapter 31

Kisa gently placed me on his motorcycle, and I once again found myself clinging to him as we raced along the streets and then highways of New Jersey, eventually riding deep into night before we crossed into Pennsylvania, then ramped onto a bridge, rising above the Delaware River, just as the sun rose in the east behind us. The road descended into a quaint, old-fashioned town that looked like something from a Norman Rockwell painting. My heart rose and I smiled as we passed an old, metal clock that read New Hope.

We pulled in front of what looked like an old mansion, with porches and railings, and when I climbed off the bike, not only were my legs stiff, but my ankle had swollen, and as soon as I tried to put my weight on it, I gasped in pain. Kisa started to pick me up, but the feelings I'd felt scared me, and I said, "No! People will get the wrong idea."

"Fine," he said, "put your arm over my shoulder." I did, and leaning on Kisa I hopped along on one foot as we climbed up the stairs and made our way into the lobby.

"Good morning! Good morning!" an apple-cheeked woman called from behind the counter. "You sure are here mighty early!"

"Yeah. Kind of an impulsive trip. Spur of the moment," Kisa said.

"So romantic!" The woman said. "Well, let's see.... Hmnnnnnnnn..."

"What is it?" I said, afraid that maybe there had been some kind of Amber alert. The thought of my parents made me suddenly sad- and worried. What would they think when Kisa, when I, didn't come home? They'd worry. I was pretty sure of that.

But the woman just squinted and shook her head side to side like some sort of bobble head. "It's just that the only rooms we have are single beds. Gosh almighty!"

"That's no problem," Kisa said, pulling me to his side. "I am a gentleman. Right, honey?"

I thought about insisting we go someplace else, but my ankle throbbed, and I could barely keep my eyes open. My whole body ached with exhaustion. "It's fine," I said. "Really."

"Well, alrighty then."

Kisa filled out the paper work, then pulled out a wad of cash, tossing some bills on the counter. Then, she swept me off my feet. I shrieked, "Put me down!" But she carried me up the stairs, and I heard apple cheeks say, "Oh, young love!" as we went upstairs and into our room, where Kisa tossed me onto the bed.

"Stop it!" I shouted.

"Sssshhhhh!" Kisa said. "We don't want to wake the neighbors."

He climbed onto the bed next to me, and I wiggled a little away. Kisa smiled at me. He had a dark growth of black stubble on his face now, and he smelled--good? It wasn't cologne, though, but something else. He reached up and ran the back of his hand along my cheek. "I'm glad you're safe," he said.

The words just kind of melted me, and his scent, and his big, caring eyes. Maybe it was because I was so tired. Hormonal. I don't know. My eyes kind of lost focus, and I was overcome with an urge to show him how much I appreciated all he'd done for me. I didn't see him as myself anymore. I didn't see him as a girl, and I leaned forward, looking deeply into those pretty eyes, and I touched his bristly beard with my finger-tips, and the next moment I realized I had kissed him, our lips meeting, and I felt my fingertips tingling as I curled my toes. All those feelings--so sweet and delicious--and terrifying. I would have pulled away, but Kisa had her hand on the back of my head, and he held me, keeping the kiss going, and I stopped struggling and just leaned in, feeling warm and safe and protected as he took me in his arms and then lay me on my back.

I found myself staring up at him, him staring down, both of us smiling, and then I giggled. "I'm not gay," I said. "You must think I'm..."

:"Amazing," Kisa said. "Incredible. The most fascinating--person-- I've ever met."

"Stop!" I said, blushing. "You're making me feel-- like a--I feel like a girl."

"You are right now. What's wrong with that?"

'It's just. I mean. I'm a dude.'

Kisa put his hand on my breast and squeezed. "You don't feel like a dude."

"Don't," I said, but he kept squeezing even as he dove in for another kiss. I felt the weight of his body pressing against me now, pushing me down into the mattress.

When our kiss ended, he started to nibble on my neck. I felt all fuzzy and giggly, and thought again about him fighting for me, how ferocious he'd looked as he smashed those weird creeps. "Thanks for rescuing me," I whispered. I felt his other hand on the inside of my thigh. That scared me. It felt so wrong, and I put my hands on his shoulders and said, "No! Stop!"

"Don't you want to switch back?" Kisa said. "We're halfway there."

"Not like this. Stop."

But he kissed me along my collarbone and said, "trust me."

I closed my eyes, swallowing hard. "Okay," I said. "But hurry. This body makes me feel so-- wrong."

"Just relax," Kisa said in a gruff voice that sent chills through my body. "Trust me."

"I do. I will."

I felt her pushing my pants down, climbing onto me, and I reached out with my own mind, trying to find hers, to take back my body. I felt like Kisa pushed back, threw up that wall, blocked me. A tremble went through my body, and I bit my lip, moaning softly.

It was all happening so fast, and I was confused and didn't even know what was happening, but then he grunted, and I felt tears coming from my eyes as I grabbed the sides of the mattress, and then he grunted again and rolled off.

I didn't even know what had happened for sure, but I thought that he'd--no. Kisa wouldn't do that to me, would he? I rolled onto my side, feeling suddenly sick, and curled up into a ball. Looking back over my shoulder, I saw Kisa sitting hunched over, his head in his hands.

"Shit," he said. "Shit. I'm sorry."

"Why didn't we switch back?" I asked, my voice sound small and scared to my own ears.

"I'm sorry," Kisa said again. "I'm so sorry."

I wanted to get away from him, and so I climbed out of bed, pulling up my pants, but then stopping when I saw the mess on my legs. "I need a shower," I said, kicking my pants off, wrapping the sheet around me.

"Okay," he said. "Good."

I went into the bathroom and locked the door. Sitting on the toilet I saw a dark wet stain on my underwear. I saw blood on the inside of my leg.

I took off my clothes, feeling more alienated from this body than ever, even from when I first found myself trapped in it. I showered, toweled off and regretfully climbed back into my pants, tossing my underwear into the trash, and then throwing a bunch of toilet paper on top of them to hide them.

I stood at the door to the bathroom, trying to think of what to say, how to face Kisa now, after what had happened. I didn't know what to feel, how to feel. I just felt numb and confused, and I needed to talk to him, and I never wanted to talk to him again. I couldn't stay in the bathroom forever, so I finally unlocked the door, took a deep breath and opened the door, determined to face this.

I stood there, staring at an empty room, my heart breaking. I saw a note and some money on the bed. A hollow feeling bubbled up in my stomach. Swallowing, I walked over and looked at the message:

Kisa--

I need some time. Stay here and keep a low profile. I will contact you soon. I want you to know that I have fallen in love with you-- as you are now. I never meant to hurt you, but I know I went too far.

Stay safe, and please forgive me. I will contact you when it's safe.

I couldn't stop the tears. They fell on the letter, blurring the ink, and then I crumbled it up and threw it away, burying my head in a pillow and punching the mattress until I finally cried myself to sleep.

Chapter 32

I slept the morning away, finally crawling out of bed when my hunger pains got too strong to ignore. Kisa had taken my phone. All I had was a room key and the pile of cash she'd left behind: I sat on the bed and counted it: 500 dollars in crisp 20 dollar bills.

I tested my ankle. It felt better. Actually okay, so I shoved the money in my pocket, then let myself out of the room and made my way outside to the wooden porch, with the wicker rocking chairs. It had gotten cold. My breath misted, and I wrapped my arms around myself, shivering. I would need a coat if Kisa didn't come for me soon. A change of clothes.

She isn't coming for you, I heard a voice whisper in my head. She's never coming for you. I thought about last night, what had happened in bed, how she'd lied to me, taken off without a word.

But no. I had to trust her. What choice did I really have?

I walked down the street looking for a place to eat. It was the first time I'd gone anywhere on my own since I'd been turned into a girl, and I felt nervous, self-conscious. It was unnerving, anyway, to be in a strange town, but I definitely did not feel as safe and capable of taking care of myself as I had before, when I was a boy.

Am I being sexist against myself? I wondered, but I didn't think so. I was smaller and weaker than I had been before, and top of that--society. Still, this looked like some dorkville town where the people were all nerds, so I figured I was pretty safe, but I still felt myself getting anxious as I walked alone, and even fighting back tears.

Girls do this every day, I reminded myself. This is the 21st Century in America, and women are just as free as men to do things like walk in a town alone.

A flash of me, on my back in the hotel room, Kisa on top of me.

I shivered.

I saw a place called Marsha Brown. It looked like a church, and the smell of broiling steaks wafted out to me. My stomach rumbled, but this did not look like the kind of place a girl with messy hair and ragged clothes would be welcomed. I glanced it forlornly, walking by, wishing I could maybe go in there, but I was way too shabby.

I saw a guy who looked about my dad's age and working up my courage I said, "Excuse me?"

"Yeah," he said, pausing, looking me over but not in that creepy way, in a dad way.

"Is there a diner around here where I can get some cheap food?"

"Sure," he said, pointing. "Star Diner. Just down there." He had this look in his eye of concern, and I could see him thinking about helping, which was the last thing I wanted.

"Thanks," I said.

"Hey," the man said. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes!" I said, worried he might call protective services or something. "I just-- I'm fine. Thanks!" I turned and hurried away, glancing back to see the man watching me, his brow furrowed.

"I'm fine! Really!" I said, plastering a smile on my face as I hurried away.

The cold was getting to me as I made my way to the diner, and by the time I walked through the smudged, glass door I found myself shivering, my teeth chattering.

"Honey, you're freezing," a waitress carrying a pot of coffee past me said as I walked in.

"Yeah. Forgot my coat."

"You want a table?"

"Yeah."

"Follow me," she said, leading me to a table at the back of a row of booths along the windows, across from a lunch counter. "You want some coffee?"

I nodded, and she poured me a cup of steaming coffee. "Cream? Milk?"

"Black, I said.

"A girl after my own heart," she said.

I smelled the hot coffee. It had a dark, earthy smell, and my eyes lit up at the promise of caffeine. I sipped it, grateful for the warmth that spread through my belly, and the instant surge of energy. When the waitress, her name was Flo, came back I ordered a bowl of chili, which I wolfed down like a pit bull, and then ordered another. Flo shook her head, and I saw that same look of concern in her eyes I'd seen in the old guy. She looked like she was about to say something, and I let that same "I'm fine" smile spread across my face. "I skipped breakfast," I said. "Plus, I love this chili."

"Well, that's a first."

"Hey!" someone complained from the kitchen.

I ate the second bowl more slowly, then ordered a piece of apple pie. "Gracious," Flo said. "You eat like a boy!"

It was the nicest thing anyone had said to me in a long time, and I said, "pee like one, too."

She laughed and shook her head. "You're sassy," she said. "I like that."

The food did a lot to improve my mood. The feeling that I was about to cry had gone away, and I felt really good, though drowsy. I left a good tip, struggled to get up and looked out the windows at the cold, gray day. "Do you know where I can get a coat around here?"

"Sure thing," Flo said. "They have a lot of cute things at The Night Owl."

She gave me the directions, and I hurried down to the Night Owl, walking in the door to see racks and racks of women's clothes on one side, and a row of men's clothes on the other. There was a hipster looking girl behind the counter with cat eye glasses and electroshock orange hair that reminded me of Nicki.

I looked at the women's side, but then shrugged and walked down the man's side. I was still a guy inside, and I didn't think I had to start buying girl clothes just because of my body. Besides, I decided, coats are coats.

Still, as I looked through the men's coats, I glanced over at the women's clothes, the dresses and skirts, the blouses, the stuff that was female specific. It had always seemed mysterious to me, a little fascinating, all the things women had to choose from, while guy clothes were pretty much all the same. I almost walked over there to the women's side, tempted to try on a dress, just to see how it felt and looked on me, but then I swallowed and focused my will.

I'm a dude, I reminded myself, conscious of the feeling of the bra straps digging into my shoulders. I'm going to keep being a dude. I have to. My night in the cocktail dress notwithstanding, I felt like I needed to assert my manhood now more than ever.

I found this really awesome Army jacket. It was a little worn and tattered, with some ragged edged patches on the sleeves and shoulders. It hung loose on me, but felt super warm, and I wore it right up to the counter. "I want this," I said smiling.

"Cool," the girl said, looking up from her book.

"I like guy clothes," I said feeling strangely self-conscious about buying a man's coat.

"Coats are coats," the girl said, setting her book down. I saw it was Blood Wolf Academy #2, and I couldn't help myself.

"I love that series," I said, laying my money on the counter.

"I love it, too," the girl said. "Even though it's actually kind of dumb."

I snickered. "But so fun, right?"

"Yeah. Have you read her other series, Athens?"

"She has another series?"

The girl reached under the counter and tossed a dog-eared paperback on the counter. "I'll throw it in with the coat," she said.

"You don't have to do that," I said.

"It's fine," she said. "And a tip--no one pays full price here. You need to learn to haggle."

"Oh," I said. "Well, okay, then. I'll take the book. Can you also knock ten dollars off the coat?"

"Too late," she said. "But now you know in case you come back to look at one of those dresses I saw you eyeing."

I flushed. "Oh, I don't wear dresses."

"Whatever." She held out her hand. "Edith."

"Kisa," I said, taking hers and shaking it.

"Come see me when you get done with that," she said. "I need someone to talk to about it. None of my friends read."

"I will," I said, shoving the book into my jacket pocket. "Thanks."

Now warm and cozy in my new coat, I shoved my hands in my pockets and decided to walk around town and work off some of that big meal I'd eaten. The town was kinda cool in that dorkville way. It ran along a river and had so many old houses. I saw a lot of rainbow flags, which reminded me of Asbury Park and Ocean Grove, which were just down the shore from Water Witch.

Am I gay now? I wondered. Or trans? Or was I something else? Did it matter? Why did I need a label, why did anyone? Couldn't I just feel and be alive?

Some of the guys on the team were a-holes and talked shit about gay kids, and they would call each other fags, never really thinking about how it made other people feel, but I was never into bullying or making people feel

bad. It just never made sense to me. I was actually pretty glad to live in a time when people could be themselves.

Which, again, I didn't even know what I was anymore. I'd kissed a boy last night, and I'd even let him-- I'd let him go all the way. Or had he just done it? I'd said no, but I had wanted my body back. I was all confused and I didn't know for sure what had even happened between us, but I knew one thing, and that was that I was no longer a virgin, and I would never be able to show my face if the kids at school ever found out.

As I walked around town, I sometimes thought about swapping with someone. I would see a guy or a girl who looked like they had it together, or even someone old, like 25 or something. I had swapped with Kyle, and I was pretty sure I could do it again. But I couldn't. It was wrong to steal someone's body, their life. I would just have to wait for Dylan to come back with my body.

I walked and walked until the sun set, and the night turned dark and even colder. I finally went back to the hotel, stopping at the desk. There was a young guy there. He looked about my age.

"Um, are there any messages for me? Room 222?"

He looked in a cubby behind him--it was that kind of old-fashioned hotel. Then he shook his head. "Sorry, Miss," he said. "is there anything else?"

I winced at being called "miss" by a guy my own age, but I just said, "No, thanks" and made my way upstairs.

Back in my room, I lay back on the bed, feeling tired, but good. I'd bought a couple boxes of cinnamon pop tarts, so I ripped a packet open and nibbled. Pulling Athens out of my pocket, I ate and read myself to sleep.

Chapter 33

Days passed. I explored the town, all the little shops selling antiques. I had never liked places like that--or never gone to them at all, actually. But I decided they didn't totally suck. Looking at all the furniture, and the old-fashioned lamps and paintings of forests and lakes reminded me of my grandparents, and I felt kind of warm and safe in those old furniture places.

Was it because I was a girl now? Was it something I had picked up from Kisa? The question seemed less and less important, and I browsed and chatted with the salespeople, and found I liked life better when I just lived it and didn't feel the need to question and judge my every thought and action.

I walked all the time, thinking of Kisa, our night together. I worried constantly. Where had he gone? When would he come back? What if he'd been captured? Or killed? I thought about his eyes, how good it felt when he carried me in his arms, when he kissed me, but then I felt terrible, too, when I thought about--

I wanted to talk to someone about it, but I couldn't! I had to keep all my shame a secret.

When I felt lonely I went to the dinner. I sat at the counter and talked to Flo when she had time. I think she thought I was a runaway. She constantly asked me about my parents. I didn't know what to say, so I just told her they'd gone out of town. Sometimes, I went to The Night Owl and hung out with Esther, but I felt so uncomfortable because Esther obsessed with

getting me to try on a dress, and she was flirty, too, and I was pretty sure she wanted to make out with me.

One day as I was trying on pants from the boy's section, she brought me a 1950s style cocktail dress, yellow with big white polka dots, not much different from the one I'd worn, the one from Kisa's closet. "You'd look great in this."

I snorted. "I'd feel like a clown."

"So, are you totally gay, then?"

I turned, shocked. "Am I what?"

"Just wondering. It's cool if you don't want to talk about it."

"I'm a--tomboy," I said. "I just always liked guy stuff."

"And you like boys?"

"Okay. Um, I guess I need to get going," I said, pulling the pants off.

"No, no, no," Esther said. "Come on. You need some clothes. I won't pester you. I'm just very open, and I don't always remember other people have their boundaries." She made ironic air quotes around the words 'boundaries.'

I laughed, and relaxed. "Cool," I said, feeling my heart warm toward her. She was actually pretty cute, and I thought if I were a guy still I might go for an artsy, smart girl like her

Days passed. I walked around town in my baggy guy clothes Hung out at the diner, the store. My money pile, which seemed pretty big when I first started, dwindled rapidly, and the male clerk at the hotel, who had progressed to constantly asking me out, told me that 'Dylan' had only paid for me to stay for two more days.

I didn't know what to do. I wanted to go back to Water Witch, see my family, try to find Kisa. But he'd told me to stay, and I had to believe he'd come back to me as he promised.

The night before I would have to check out of the hotel, I heard it--the buzz and rat, tat, tat of a motorcycle pulling up in front of the hotel. I ran to the window and yanked back the curtains, my heart almost burst when I saw him, swinging his leg over the bike, pulling his helmet off, looking up at me, right into my eyes. He had that sweet, dark stubble on his chin, and he smiled, and the sight of that smile warmed me. My conflicted feelings about our last night together vanished, and all I could think was that he'd come back for me, and I would be rescued at last.

I couldn't wait. I ran to the door, let myself out and raced down the stairs. He stood at the bottom, tall and broad shouldered, and I leapt off the last stair, throwing my arms around him, wrapping my legs around his mid-section. He caught me, and laughed, then kissed me. "Did you miss me?" he said.

I felt ridiculous, and I didn't care. He started to put me down, but I said, "carry me."

"I just rode for hours," he said, setting me down. "My legs hurt."

Looking at him, I saw a coldness, a distance, and it stabbed at me. We walked back to the room, and when the door closed I started peppering Kisa with questions, but he just said, "Calm down. Calm down. Take a seat."

"But, how are my parents? I just-"

"Shut up!" he bellowed, making a chopping motion with his hand, slicing it through the air like a blade. "SIT DOWN!"

I sat, shocked.

Dylan slipped the backpack off his shoulders and opened it up. "I brought some clothes. Plus, other things you'll need. Tampons and stuff. Also, here is some more money." He tossed an envelope into my lap. I picked it up, looking inside to see more crisp, 20 dollar bills.

"I don't want this," I said. "I want to go home. I want my life back."

"It's not safe yet," he snapped. "I am still trying to protect your family--and you. Now, shut up and listen. You will stay here. I will keep paying for the hotel. You will keep quiet and remain in hiding. Do you understand?"

"Why are you talking to me like this? Why are you acting this way?"

"I'm under a lot of pressure!" Dylan said, turning away from me. "I really don't need all this drama from you."

I sat there, clutching the envelop full of money, feeling guilty, alone, confused. "I'm-- I'm sorry," I said.

Dylan turned, his jaw set. "I need to get back to Water Witch."

"You're going now?"

"I have to. So they won't notice my absence."

"When will you be back?"

"Soon."

I stood and stepped to him. He gave me a quick kiss on the cheek, then put his hands on my hips and pushed me away. "Goodbye," he said, turning, opening the door and leaving.

He said goodbye. I heard forever.

I started after him. I felt there was more I needed to say, but then I stopped, going to the window, watching him get on his motorcycle and drive off. He never looked up at me. He never looked back.

My vision blurred, and I realized I had started crying, the tears rolling down my cheeks. I felt almost sure I would never see Dylan again, would never see my family, my town, my friends. It seemed like only yesterday I hated

all that and couldn't wait to get away, and now that I'd lost it all I didn't know if I could take the pain.

Chapter 34

After three days, I went to a barber and told him to cut all that long, annoying hair off. I had to beg him. "Young girls should have beautiful, long hair," he said. "You'll be sorry if you do this."

"Do it," I said. "I know what I want." It was my hair now, and I'd started getting into the habit of chewing on it all the time, so that needed to stop, plus I didn't want to be bothered with all the trouble long hair made for me.

The day came when the clerk at the hotel told me the reservation had run out. I could barely keep myself from crying. I had to face the truth of Dylan's betrayal, and I was furious at him for doing this to me, for abandoning me, for turning me into a girl and making me love him. And hate him.

I managed to hold back the tears, at least until I got to the diner. I sat down at my usual stool, sure that I'd put on a brave face, but as soon as Flo looked at me, "Oh, honey, what's wrong?"

I started to cry--I hated that I found myself crying so much, but Flo put her arm around me and took me in the back room, and I poured out my heart to her--how Dylan had brought me here and promised to come back, and how I finally had to face the fact that he'd abandoned me.

"Men," Flo spat. "They'd run from their own shadow if it had any needs."

"I don't have a place to stay. I don't have any money."

"Well," Flo said. "I can ask around about a place. But Jane just quit. You could get some shifts here and make some money."

"A waitress? Me?"

"Sure. It's not so hard," she said, misunderstanding my reservations.

I looked at the uniform--a knee length polyester dress. But I felt so grateful for her friendship and her help, I couldn't say no, so I nodded, smiled through the tears and said, "Okay. Yes. Thanks!"

Esther knew someone who had a backroom they rented out, and so I moved my stuff from the hotel room to a narrow little apartment with a hot plate and an old Frigidaire refrigerator that rattled and gasped, but worked.

I felt proud of myself. I'd managed, I'd figured it out. I had my own little apartment, a job, and I felt like I would make it, that maybe I would even find a way to get my body back. I just needed time.

My first day working as a waitress came. I thought about how dumb it was they had to have a different word for a female server. At least, they used to. I knew a lot of places just called everyone servers now. It was surreal and strange to get up one morning and shave my legs, running the razor up and down my calves, then sliding my hands over them, feeling how smooth and silky my skin felt. But I would be wearing a dress, and I was now required to shave my legs, plus anyway Flo assured me I would get much better tips if I "prettied up and flirted."

I guess the patriarchy isn't dead after all, I thought.

I put on a bra, and then stepped into my waitress uniform. I looked in the mirror, and felt more like a young woman than ever, seeing how it hugged my breasts and hips, showed off my long legs. But it was more than that, too. It looked like something from another era, an era when women were still so much less than men, and I saw myself now as one of those girls from an old movie or a television show, a dame, a broad, a gal with a great pair of stems.

I needed to be cute and pretty now to make a living. I was choosing to be objectified, but did I really have much choice? I thought back on how I'd once feared I would end up a Hooters girl if I ran away in this body. Well, I suddenly didn't feel all that superior anymore, and whatever arrogance I'd had about myself being too good for that kind of thing faded away as I took a tube of lipstick and painted my lips, all in the hope some old dude would give me some money in exchange for my pretty smile.

I went to the diner. The old guys came in. I smiled and flirted, and they smiled and flirted, and I got good tips. Would Kisa do this, I wondered? She was all about strong women, feminism, rock and roll. I couldn't picture her walking around with a pot of coffee, smiling until her cheeks hurt.

She'd done a better job of living my life as a boy and a girl, I supposed. But what of it? I'd found myself abandoned in a strange town, trapped in another person's body, and I'd survived. I felt proud of that, though not always of the way I'd done it.

During the late morning lull, I leaned against the counter, my legs aching from all the walking. I thought back to that night, the night when I'd first seen Kisa.

It had started with a shooting star. I remembered that star, arcing across the sky above New York City, which itself was reflected in the water of the bay. Cassie had been with me. We'd been snuggling, and when she asked me if I'd made a wish I'd lied to her and said no.

But I had made a wish. I wish I wasn't like this.

And I realized my wish had come true. I was nothing like I'd been before, and not just my body, but my mind.

Would I go back to that? I asked myself. If I could get another wish, would I wish myself back to the boy I'd been?

The answer came easily. No. I wouldn't. He'd been cold, selfish, bored with life and lazy in his privileged existence. He never read anything but a playbook.

And now, I was smart, and loved to read, passionate about life and music, and was making it on my own.

I was Kisa now. Not the Kisa that had been, but a new Kisa, a better one, a Kisa who cared about other people, and who got knocked down but just got right back up, and I was a far better person now than I had ever been before.

I have pale skin and pretty, green eyes. I'm a waitress, and I am proud of the life I've built for myself. I miss my family and my friends. Sometimes, I cry at night when I think about them, and the possibility I may never see them again. But, maybe it's for the best? Because I'm not that boy any more. I'm not any boy, and I don't know if I would want to be one.

Boys lie. They don't care about anyone else's feelings. They hurt people. I'm not like them.

I'm Kisa. I'm a girl, and I love myself. I think?

CHAPTER 35

I wanted Esther to be there, so I asked her if she wanted to come over. "Is there a chance we'll end up having sex?" She asked.

"Probably not," I said, shaking my head. "But, there will definitely be fire."

"I like fire," Esther said.

Outside it had begun to snow. Big, fat flakes that just drifted down from the dark, night sky, catching the light from the street lamps. Esther locked up the store, and as we walked home she kicked at the snow and said, "Pain in the ass. In the morning, I'll have to shovel and throw down salt."

"I like it," I said, trying to catch a flake on my tongue. "It makes everything look nice. It covers all the dirty and the ugly things."

"Until I shovel it up at least," Esther said.

We arrived at my little apartment. I had a small charcoal grill in the little yard behind the house. It had once been black with metal legs, now all blotched with rust marks.

Esther got a fire going, while I brought out some candles and set them in a circle around the grill, lighting them. I'd bought them at the hippy store, and the damp, snowy air filled with the smells of sage, juniper and lavender, plus the charcoal and the faint, sweet odor of the lighter fluid.

"Are we summoning a demon or something?" Esther said, standing close to the grill, the flames dancing in her eyes, flickering across her face.

"Casting one out is more like it," I said. I went into my apartment and came back out holding the football jersey that Kisa had left for me, that someone I vaguely remembered being used to wear.

"Some ex?" Esther said.

"Someone I need to say goodbye to," I said. "Someone I need to let go of."

"How do you want to do this?"

"Will you kneel with me?"

She nodded, and we got down on our knees in the snow. I could feel the fire warming my face, even as my back grew cold. I started crying, and I didn't know if I could go through with it, if I could say goodbye to Dylan, to his life. I didn't know if I could face his death, and I pulled the jersey to my chest, hugging it to me.

Esther put her hand on my knee. "Do you want me to do it?" She asked, and I heard something break in her voice, and there was a distant look in

her eyes, like she was feeling everything I was feeling, but she was brave enough to face it, with me.

"I feel broken," I said to her. "Like I'm not a person, but just-- shards, broken pieces of glass, and that I'll never be whole. I'll always just be this cracked and discarded thing."

"We're all broken," Esther said. "And maybe you'll never be whole, but you will never be a thing." She started to take the jersey from me, but I pulled it back. "You need to let go of this."

"I know," I said, nodding. "I need to do it."

Esther nodded, and I could see she was holding back tears. I stood up, and held the jersey out toward the flickering fire. "Goodbye, Dylan," I whispered. "I never hated you, but I never loved you, either."

I lowered the jersey and the flames began to lick at it. I held it there as it caught fire, and as the blue material began to melt and smoke, I thought of my parents, Cassie, my little brother and especially my sister, the one I'd never gotten to know until it was too late, and who now and for the first time I realized I loved and admired. The flames climbed up the jersey, and they started to lick at my wrists and fingers, but I held on, unable to let go, and I tried to think of Dylan, the boy I'd been, and I realized I couldn't remember his face. I felt Esther slip her arm around my waist and hug me from behind, and she whispered in my ear, "Let go."

I let the jersey drop into the flames, and I collapsed into Esther, who held me as I sobbed, and kept whispering "Let go. Let go. Let go."

Our lips met, our mouths hot. The kiss tasted of tears, and I kissed her again, and she kissed me back, and then I looked back over my shoulder at the black smoke rising into the white snow.

"We shouldn't do this," I said, looking into her eyes.

"Why not?"

"I'm too broken," I said. "I have too many secrets."

Esther put her hand on my cheek and shook her head and kissed me. We flickered for a moment, seeing each other from the other's eyes, and then we kissed again.

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