

Julian Files



AN ICOS BACK STORY

BY AIS

**Julian Files is a series set in the past for In the Company of Shadows.
It contains MAJOR SPOILERS for Fade, so do not read until you have
finished Fade! I mean it!!!!**

One

*Thursday May 12, 2005
Lexington, PA*

Even on the far end of Crandall Park's sprawling playground, shrieking kids disrupted the otherwise calm morning. Julian's fingers twitched and he resisted for the third time reaching for his pack of Winstons. He'd have gone for it anyway if the adulterating mom across the way didn't give him the evil eye every time he touched his pocket.

Jennifer Groves, twenty-seven years old. Whitebread America mistressing it up with a certain Latino charmer named Joaquin Padilla. Julian doubted she knew he was the PI who had given her husband the racy photos of the two of them going at it like horny teenagers against a window of the White Oaks, but being as she recently stopped smoking she knew a fellow nicotine addict when she saw one. Not that her attempt to go clean living was liable to last long, once good ole Chris Groves was done raking her through the divorce proceedings.

It never ceased to amaze Julian how stupid so many people were. What made them think being in a mid-range hotel made the windows any less transparent when they decided to play out their little fantasies? And so many of them had the receiving partner facing the window, too. Made his job a whole hell of a lot easier to get the money shot.

He considered whipping out a smoke anyway just to fuck with her, when he noticed Cedrick approaching.

The man was a conundrum. He wasn't bad looking by any stretch, but he easily could have been forgettable. Stocky build, average height, brown eyes, brown hair... Nothing stood out at a glance. In a photo, he would have been the guy in the background no one thought to look at twice.

The gift of anonymity.

Julian wished he had the same, at times.

But in motion, that was when all the little bits came together and made Cedrick recognizable. His easy, loping gait. The smile that seemed ever ready on the edges of his lips, and that goddamned infectious grin that popped up at the least expected moments. Made his whole face light up like a Christmas tree, and at times even made Julian fight a grin in return.

The trademark Beaulieu not-yet-smile was in place as Cedrick strode toward him slower than normal, and when all the trees and kidlets were out of the way Julian saw why.

He raised his eyebrows and flicked a glance down at Cedrick's side.

"Brought the kid, huh?"

"Couldn't get a babysitter." Cedrick rested his hand around Boyd's skinny little shoulders, pulling him against his thigh like some sort of tall dog. The fond smile aimed down at him probably wouldn't have looked out of place in those circumstances, either. "Can't say I'm sad about it, though. I don't get enough time with him as it is."

Cedrick dropped easily onto the park bench next to Julian, and soon it was the both of them who stared at Boyd.

Truth be told, the kid creeped Julian out. Like Cedrick, his photo op impression was different than his video. He was a cute kid by looks alone: fine blond hair, huge eyes an unusual amber; a skinny little thing with pouty lips. He hovered in that childlike androgynous zone of not seeming resigned to any gender entirely.

Maybe if he smiled once in a dinosaur's age it'd be fine but he was like a little alien. He stared at people like he was dissecting their motivations, filing it away in some five-year-old version of Enemy vs Friend, or maybe he was just trying to figure out what the fuck was going on around him. Julian might have thought he was slow but he'd seen the kid write and draw well beyond his nephew who was four years older. And when the kid talked, which wasn't often, there were times his sentence structure and astute observations were like he was twice his age.

Julian sometimes wondered if the kid was going to turn into a serial killer someday. If so, he should probably make sure he wasn't on the kid's hit list.

"Hey there, champ." Julian patted the bench next to him. "You can sit down. Last I checked you weren't a vampire and this bench wasn't a house so I'm pretty sure you don't need an invitation."

When Boyd only stared at him with his too-guarded-for-a-five-year-old face and luminous eyes, Julian felt the same weird mixture of aggravation, bemusement, and devilry he often felt around the kid. He didn't resist the temptation to reach out and ruffle his hair so harshly it made his head rock back and forth like a little bobblehead.

When his hand dropped, Boyd's hair stood up in huge tangled tufts not unlike the aftermath of a balloon rubbing. Julian smirked in satisfaction. Boyd stared just as seriously out of that, making him look like a grumpy, rumped cat.

"Ha!" Julian said.

Cedrick chuckled and leaned forward, gently smoothing Boyd's hair back down. He rested his fingers on Boyd's chin and turned his face toward him. Boyd let his head move but his eyes remained on Julian until the last second when they flicked over to his dad.

Like Julian always said. Fucking creepy.

"Why don't you go play with the others, Boyd? We came here so you could have some fun."

Boyd's pouty little lips turned down even further. Jesus. He had the same disapproving stare as his mother. If he didn't turn out to be a serial killer, he'd become something equally terrifying. Julian was sure of it.

“They won’t approve of me.”

Seriously, what five-year-old talked like that?

“Yes, they will.” The fatherly smile of Cedrick’s was all manner of affection with a little bit of mischief tossed in for spice. “And if they don’t, forget them. They aren’t good enough for you. You can have fun on your own.”

Boyd looked over his shoulder at the play set, looked back at his dad, and hesitated. There was something vulnerable in the slight quaking of his shoulders; the way his eyebrows drew in and his feet seemed poised between flight and folding. Those little fingers of his twitched at his sides.

“I don’t want you to leave me. What if I go and when I come back you’re gone?”

It was said in such a small voice, made all the smaller for coming from a young kid like that. A pang pulled at Julian and he had to look away.

He felt bad for the kid. Boyd didn’t exactly have Mother of the Year waiting for him at home all those days Cedrick was out gallivanting around playing the modern day superhero. The one time Julian had been invited to that house he’d sworn to himself he would never return. It was immaculate in looks but felt like a funeral parlor. Like something intangible had died and the pall of it had soaked into the shadows and cluttered up all the empty spaces of the rooms.

“It’s alright,” Cedrick was saying soothingly. “I’ll be right here watching you. I’m not going anywhere.” He lightly shoved Boyd’s shoulder. “Go play.”

Boyd wavered in place for another heartbeat before apparently deciding he could risk walking away from his dad for a few minutes to play on the playground with the other kids. Even then, Boyd was cautious in his steps and he kept looking back over his shoulder as if to reassure himself that his father hadn’t disappeared in the last two seconds. The fact that a little kid even put that much thought into something like this killed Julian a little inside.

But then, a lot of the kids of this generation feared loss for good reason.

Cedrick held still until Boyd very carefully clambered up onto one of the little mechanical trucks and set to diligently scooping a hole in the sand and meticulously dropping the sand in a pile to the right. At that, Cedrick finally let out a long, heavy breath and dropped his head against the bench with his eyes closed. His arms stretched across the back of the bench.

“He makes me feel like the terrible father I am.”

“You’re not a bad dad.” Julian propped his ankle on his other knee and patted his Winstons to reassure himself that they, too, hadn’t moved. The kid’s paranoia was getting to him. “You just have a... advanced kid.”

The pinch in Cedrick’s face made him look a lot older than his twenty-five years. “I should be around him more. A lot more. I want to be, I just...”

Julian sighed loudly. “Are we going to do the psychiatrist thing again, Ced? Because I told you. I’m shit as a shrink. My advice to you is have a stiff drink and buck up.”

The not-quite-smile toyed with Cedrick’s lips. “That advice has some merit.”

A scoff was his answer, and the two of them fell silent. Jennifer the Joaquin-diddler eyed him even harder now that there was a kid attached to him by proxy. Julian smirked at her and considered slopping a big wet kiss on Cedrick’s cheek to make her think they were gay for each other, just to see

the knee-jerk bigot reaction he knew was dwelling under the surface of her girl-next-door facade. But then he'd have to deal with Cedrick finding that to be hilarious and one-upping him by grabbing his crotch or some shit, and it'd be all downhill from there.

So instead, Julian stared her hard in the eyes and very pointedly pulled out his Winstons to rattle them in front of him. Her eyes narrowed, more out of jonesing than judgment, and Julian's smirk went straight into asshole territory.

"I don't think you can make it a day without messing with someone," Cedrick commented.

Julian glanced over and saw that Cedrick hadn't taken his eyes off his son, but he must have seen the interaction in his peripheral vision. Julian shrugged, unabashed. He set to relieving the pack of one of the cigarettes.

"She's been side-eyeing me since I got here. Serves her right at this point."

"One of your clients?"

"Nah." Julian's words were slightly muffled by the cigarette dangling between his lips. He shoved the pack back in his pocket and patted around for his lighter. "One of the wives, though."

"She know that?"

"Nope." The lighter's flame flickered in the faint breeze. He relished both the initial hit of nicotine and the way Jennifer chewed the inside of her lip.

"So it's just your natural charm that attracted her," Cedrick said dryly, and Julian couldn't help grinning.

"Seems so."

"Other than the unnamed woman you've managed to piss off by point of being alive, you have anything interesting to run with lately?"

"Are we talking Sun-interesting, or Guild-interesting?" Julian glanced over at Cedrick. "Because those are entirely different criteria."

Cedrick shrugged. "Either."

"Hmm."

Julian rocked his foot, making his other knee bounce up and down in mid-air. From his view, Boyd was cloaked in a wreath of cigarette smoke. The kid must have dug down as far as he could go because he had straddled the truck and managed to turn it far enough to start digging another hole.

"What's he doing, anyway?"

Cedrick shrugged. "He does that."

"Digs random holes?"

A slight smile. "No. He tries to figure out the world around him."

Julian was pretty sure the '...' could practically be read in the air, the way he stared at Cedrick.

Cedrick flashed a grin, and sat forward with his forearms braced on his knees. "On the way over, when I told him we were going to the park, he asked if there was a sandpit. I told him there was. He asked how they were made. How the sand got there in the middle of the grass. Where it came from. Why it didn't blow away in the wind. I told him usually they dug into the ground, laid something

down like wood or plastic or whatever, and then brought in sand from somewhere else and put it there for the safety of the kids. Then he wanted to know why people liked sand. I told him it was up to each person, and maybe he could figure out why *he* liked sand.”

His hand splayed out, gesturing at Boyd who was considering the current hole he was digging with all the solemn contemplation of a foreman overseeing a multi-million dollar project. “I guarantee you, when we get back into the car he’s going to have his answer. And it probably won’t just be ‘I can dig holes in it.’ It’ll probably be something about how the sand can be any shape or it’s hard to control but you can still make it do what you want, and next thing he’ll be asking is what will make the sand act differently...”

“He’s a smart kid,” Julian allowed.

“Yeah.” The grin ratcheted up to show all of Cedrick’s white teeth. “He is. I think he’ll end up skipping a few grades in the future.”

Julian didn’t even have to contemplate the thought, but he did just to give an excuse for a cigarette break. “Yeah. He will.”

“He gets it from his mom, mostly,” Cedrick said thoughtfully.

“Ha.” The word nearly transformed into a snort. “That relentless digging—no pun intended—comes from you, buddy boy. Not Vanity Fair Viv.”

“She’s a chess player.”

Julian grimaced. “I’m not calling her stupid, I’m saying she’s willing to accept the status quo if it works in her favor.”

Cedrick was already shaking his head before Julian had finished. He finally dragged his eyes off his son and settled his stare on Julian. “No. I mean, she’s constantly thinking ahead. Planning her next move. Trying to determine how it will affect whatever she’s doing at the moment. I may wonder about the why of everything, Boyd too, but Vivienne is the one who wants to know the how. Because once she knows that, she can control it. Boyd, I’ve noticed—he does that too.”

“I could see that.”

Silence fell between them again but it didn’t last long. “So?”

“So, what?”

“So, any interesting stories for me?”

“Oh. Well, in the scandal department the Mayor’s recently resigned aide turns out to have a thing for tying up the ladies.”

Cedrick chuckled and settled back to watch Boyd again. “If you ever want some extra cash, you could write a gossip column in the Sun.”

“Could I go into salacious detail about everyone’s sex lives?”

“Probably not.”

“Guess I’ll have to write it in my memoir, then.”

“You’ll have to. There’s nothing interesting about you; it’s all about what you see.”

“Are you calling me boring?”

"I'm calling you normal."

Julian scoffed. "See if I invite you to my bachelor party."

"You got someone to propose to you when I wasn't looking?"

"No," Julian grumbled and set to finishing off his cigarette. He spoke with the smoke still caught against his tongue. "But if I ever do, you aren't invited."

"That's gonna be a lonely party with you sitting there alone with a stripper."

Julian snorted. "Who said I'd get a stripper? We've already established I know everyone's dirty sex lives. I'm sure I could insinuate my way into the more interesting ones for a night."

Cedrick's rumbling laugh comforted Julian, somehow. Must be nostalgia.

"Did I show you Boyd's latest drawing?"

"No, but I know you're about to no matter what I say."

Cedrick dragged a folded-up piece of paper out of his back pocket and Julian looked over incredulously.

"*Seriously?* You carry his shit around in your pocket? You are the most ridiculous father I have ever met. Some days I can't even handle you."

Cedrick straightened indignantly. "You said to show you his drawing!"

"Yeah, like a *normal person!* Jesus Christ. Who the fuck walks around with a five-year-old's drawing wadded up in his back pocket? His photo? Fine, put that shit in your wallet, that's normal. But *refrigerator art?*"

Cedrick scowled. It was funny how the only times Julian ever saw the guy actually pissed off was when it was about some perceived injustice, or someone was calling him out on being the stupidest doting dad in the world.

"I'll have you know I've seen less talented art in museums than I've seen Boyd draw in—"

"Oh for fuck's sake." Julian snatched the crinkled paper out of Cedrick's hand and made a whole lot of noise straightening it out against his propped up thigh to drown out his friend. When it was flat enough to see, he eyed it thoughtfully.

The kid was surprisingly talented. Julian always had a hard time believing the stuff Cedrick showed off actually came from Boyd.

At an age when most kids drew flat-legged horses and stick-figure parents, Boyd drew character studies. This one was of some young kid who looked familiar to Julian. Wild-ass curly hair falling into big eyes and a devil-may-care grin. Looked to be Boyd's age. In the drawing he was holding his finger to his lips like he was about to embark on an adventure he knew he'd be in deep shit for and he was trying to establish his conspirators from the start.

The drawing wasn't perfect, that was true, but it was a damn sight better than Julian could ever hope to accomplish. And he had twenty-plus years on the kid.

"Louis Krauszer," Julian said when realization hit. "Emily and Thomas Krauszer's kid."

Cedrick grinned. "See? He's an excellent artist."

“You see that little shit on the news all the time. Hovering behind his hippy-dippy parents always looking like he’s up to no good.”

“Well,” Cedrick said with a chuckle. “Knowing what I do of him so far, that’s probably true.”

“What’s Boyd doing drawing him?”

“He was invited to Lou’s birthday party this weekend.”

Julian’s eyebrows shot up. “We’re talking the Krauszers, right? Mom’s a House Rep? Father’s a Senator?”

“Yep.” Cedrick looked way too proud of himself.

“Shit, Beau. They’re gonna serve million-dollar caviar draped with gold powder. You have to let me come. Tell them I’m your long lost cousin.”

Cedrick laughed under his breath and eyed Julian. “I don’t think that’ll work, JJ. Your eyes are too blue, you’re too tall and skinny. We look nothing alike. You’d fit Vivienne’s side better, if we could bleach your hair.”

Julian heaved out a great sigh and dropped his head back. The sky was a mass of gunmetal grey clouds overhead. “Forget it. Even caviar isn’t worth pretending I’m French.”
“I’ll be sure to tell Vivienne you said that.”

Julian was about to ask how an introverted kid like Boyd ended up trading invites with Lexington’s elites when he noticed the heaviness darkening Cedrick’s eyes.

“What?”

Cedrick glanced at him from the corner of his eye, and then ran a hand through his hair. “I was just thinking.” He paused, and Julian knew Cedrick well enough to recognize this was something his friend didn’t want to admit but felt it would be untrue not to. His honesty ran as deep as the Earth’s fault lines, and caused just as much disruption at times. “Boyd is... different.”

Julian snorted. “You think?”

Cedrick crossed his arms. “I think it makes him stand out. Not always in a good way.”
“Is something going on?”

Cedrick hesitated again before the words left in a rush. “I think he’s being bullied.”

“Bullied? Isn’t he, what? In Preschool?”

“Kindergarten.”

“Bullies start that young?”

“You must not spend enough time around kids if you haven’t figured out they can be crueller than anyone else. If someone doesn’t fit their expectations, they can be relentless. And Boyd’s been... quieter lately.”

“Wow. I didn’t think that was possible.”

“I’m serious, Julian.” The pleading in Cedrick’s eyes shot down Julian’s automatic snarky retort. “I’m worried about him. He may be young but he doesn’t like troubling anyone. It’s as easy getting issues out of him as it is Vivienne.”

Julian frowned contemplatively at Boyd. He could see it, but...

“Even so, bullies who play fingerpaint Picasso on the side?” Julian shook his head in disgust and kicked at some cigarette butts near his foot. “What the fuck is going on with the world today?”

“War.”

“Yeah,” Julian said soberly. “There’s that.”

Julian’s fingers ticked against the crinkled paper until finally he sighed and carefully folded the Krauszer portrait back along the lines from whence it came. He handed the folded sheet over to Cedrick between his pointer and middle finger without looking away from Boyd.

Days like this, a person could almost forget that so much was blown to shit outside the park’s boundaries. That millions of people had died five years ago and even their politicians didn’t seem to know when the next strike would come.

“Are you going to talk to the teacher?”

“As soon as I can.”

“Good.”

They fell into mutual silence that remained even after Boyd looked up at them both with a furrow in his eyebrows. He stood up, and with the most determined expression Julian had ever seen on a five-year-old he meticulously walked over to them with his grubby little hands clenching something. Julian felt a mild paranoia that some frog was going to leap out at his face when the kid got closer, but in the end when Boyd stopped in the space between their legs it was only a handful of sand that he held out in front of him like precious jewels.

“Seahorses,” he said quite firmly.

“What?” Julian and Cedrick both said at once, the word blurred by the half-second offset in timing.

Boyd peered down at the sand cupped in his palms, although Julian could see it was ever so slowly siphoning its way down between his fingers.

“I think it’s seahorses and rocks and shells,” Boyd explained.

Sort of. The explanation made no damn sense to Julian, but apparently Cedrick spoke Toddlerese.

“That’s what the sand is made of?”

Boyd nodded resolutely. “Because it comes from the sea and if you look close you can see the shells. And it’s seahorses because they have the different colors and it’s rocks because you can see them. And it has to have stars too because some parts shine the same the way I see sometimes at night. How do the stars get in the sand?” He looked up curiously at his father.

Cedrick smiled and ran a hand over Boyd’s pale hair. “I guess that’s the next thing we’ll have to figure out, isn’t it?”

Boyd sighed heavily. “I guess.”

“Why so bummed, baby Beau?” Julian asked.

“Because I just figured out the sand and now I have to figure out the stars, too,” Boyd said morosely.

“Jesus. The life of a five-year-old contains some huge questions nowadays.”

“What did you have to figure out when you were five?” Boyd asked him, and Julian was caught by both the question and the eerily similar way Boyd peered at him like his father. Serial killer. Definitely.

“Uh.” Julian frowned at the kid and absently ran his thumb along the seam of his jeans. “I don’t remember. How to get my mom to give me ice cream before dinner, probably.”

Cedrick laughed. “I don’t remember ever being successful in that venture.”

Boyd’s stare turned onto Cedrick. “What’s ‘venture’?”

“An attempt to do something risky. Something you try that might not work.”

“Venture,” Boyd repeated quietly to himself, like he was committing it to memory. Knowing the kid, he probably was.

“Are you going to bring the sand home with you?” Julian asked when he kept holding it out.

Boyd eyed the sand and then shook his head decisively. “No. I might see the stars again tonight.”

With that, he turned his back on them and gingerly returned to the sandbox where he tottered around seemingly in search of something specific. He finally alighted on it and squatted to delicately set the handful of sand down.

“Oh my god,” Julian muttered in perverse fascination. “He’s putting it back exactly where it came from. That kid is a fucking alien, I’m telling you.”

“Vivienne taught him that.”

“To return sand to the sandbox *exactly where he picked it up?*”

Cedrick rolled his eyes and shoved his thigh against Julian’s. Julian’s legs rocked with the motion. “To put away his toys, you ass.”

“Does he even *have* toys? Not for nothing, but Vivienne seems like she’d death glare them out of existence if anything cluttered up her magazine-spread home.”

Cedrick looked for a moment like he planned to argue but the flash of guilt that tightened his features was too obvious to ignore. He let out a deep breath that deflated him instead. “Put things away when he’s done with them, I mean. He doesn’t have much in the way of traditional toys.”

“Your kid’s life is kind of depressing.”

Julian hadn’t meant to say it aloud. He’d thought it a lot of times but never meant to actually say it. But watching that little kid place a handful of sand in the precise place he’d picked it up brought the whole thing home harder than he’d expected.

Cedrick’s face turned pained. His fingers clenched and unclenched. “I know,” he said quietly.

“So fix it,” Julian said flatly. He glared at Cedrick. “You act all depressed when you think you aren’t father of the year, but you obviously care about this kid. You’re the most obnoxious dad I know, and believe me, I run across a lot. But you don’t do shit about the things you can actually affect, and just let it run you over with guilt later. What’s the point? Stop it at the start and be done with it. Buy the kid some toys and let him act five years old in his own goddamn home, for fuck’s sake.”

“It’s complicated,” Cedrick said tightly. “Vivienne...”

“Vivienne *what?*” Julian demanded, but by then Boyd was suddenly standing right in front of them again. Little ninja serial killer. Julian hadn’t even heard him approach.

Those huge honey-colored eyes watched them both. Julian scoffed and relented, unwilling to push the topic in front of the one five-year-old he knew who would probably actually understand the conversation. Aggravated, he shoved himself to his feet and crossed his arms. He glowered down at Cedrick, who was not quite meeting his eyes.

“Get your shit together, Cedrick, or stop whining to me about your failings. News flash: you aren’t perfect. No one is. Choose your battles if you have to but don’t come crying to me if you’re going to lament the ending of the ones you avoided.”

He didn’t give Cedrick the chance to respond, although he did notice him wince. Julian grabbed the only thing he had on him that was anything like a gift, which turned out to be his notebook and pen. It was an old style; small, with a metal case that enclosed the small pad of paper entirely and was held together by interlocking holes on the side where the pen fit. It was dark brown with a simple blue checkered design. He ripped out the few sheets of paper he’d used for notes recently, shoved them in his pocket, then held out the note case to Boyd.

“Here, kid. It’s not much, but... Have fun drawing with it in your room or something, okay?”

Boyd was wide-eyed, holding up his hands hesitantly like he was about to receive a dollop of holy water from Jesus or some shit. Julian felt equally disgusted toward Cedrick and Vivienne, and pained for Boyd. If the kid turned into a serial killer, it probably wouldn’t be his fault.

Fingers curling around the note case like some kind of precious artifact, Boyd hugged it to his chest and craned his neck to stare up at Julian.

“This is for me?” The hushed voice and huge eyes made Boyd seem every bit his age. For once.

“Yeah, kid.” Julian patted Boyd’s head, and didn’t even ruffle his hair this time. “It’s small enough so you should be able to bring it around with you... if you want.”

Jesus. Now he just sounded awkward. He had to leave before he turned into a complete idiot.

He took one giant step backward, and flicked a pointed stare at Cedrick. Then he turned his attention to Boyd with a lazy wave. “Catch you later, small fry.”

He left before he had to see something else that would piss him off. At least Jennifer looked pretty miserable as he passed her. She had a phone against her ear and was eyeing the empty air like it held the answer to why life sucked so fucking much sometimes. The clip of the conversation he heard, starting with a pleading, “Chris,” and ending with a less convincing, “I swear—” gave him all the answers he might have wanted for the reason.

Julian shoved his fists into the pockets of his jacket and wondered where he was going to find another of those note cases, and how he was going to look at it in the near future without thinking of that poor kid looking like Santa came to town over something so minuscule.

Fuck’s sake. Some days he wondered why humanity was so fucked up. Other days, he had a sinking feeling he had a pretty damn good idea why.

Two

Friday May 13, 2005

*Carlisle Windsor School, All Saints neighborhood
Lexington, PA*

"That child is there again."

The man said it flatly, and Boyd got nervous. He ducked back into the hallway, wondering if he was in trouble now.

He hadn't meant to see the man again, but the man and his friend always went to one of the back classrooms in the unused building on the corner of campus. Since Austin put Boyd's backpacks in weird places like that, Boyd always had to go there before he left. He'd done his best to stay quiet and unseen like always but he must have done something wrong.

Boyd was just debating if it was worse to go home without his backpack and have his mother angry with him or to interrupt the man and his friend, when he realized a third, very tall man had come up behind him.

Boyd's heart clenched. He looked up and up and up, into angry eyes.

"I'm sorry," Boyd said, not knowing yet what he'd done wrong but thinking it was probably good to let them know right away he knew it was his fault.

"Bring her in," said the man inside.

The tall man grabbed Boyd's shoulder—it hurt—and pushed him ahead of him into the room. Once inside, Boyd saw the man's friend was looking surprised.

And now that he was closer, Boyd realized he knew who the man was. It was Mr. Cole, Austin's father. Boyd had seen him pick Austin up from school sometimes but it was always far away. Mr. Cole wore a hat and different kind of clothing here in the back room than he ever did in public, so Boyd hadn't recognized him until he was close.

"Are you sure about this?" asked the friend, but Mr. Cole was peering at Boyd.

"Who is she?" he demanded.

"I don't know." The very tall man shook Boyd. "Who are you?"

Boyd twisted the hem of his shirt between his fingers, and shyly, guiltily, looked up at Mr. Cole through his eyebrows. "I'm Boyd Beaulieu, sir. I'm sorry to bother you. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Mr. Cole's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Beaulieu? I know that name. As in that woman Vivienne?"

"That's my mother, sir."

Mr. Cole's friend swore, which made Mr. Cole frown at him.

"It's fine," Mr. Cole said.

"No, it isn't!" hissed the friend, and moved closer to Mr. Cole. He and Mr. Cole got into a quiet conversation but even though they may have thought Boyd couldn't hear, he could.

“That bitch doesn’t know when to hold her tongue,” the friend growled under his breath. “And she’s too astute. For a damn spy, she reports everything. You know how much trouble she’s caused some of the parents already? If she finds out—”

“What will she do?” Mr. Cole watched his friend closely. “Whine about her inferiority?”

“But what if she—”

“You think I fear that harpy? You think she’s more powerful than I am?” Mr. Cole’s voice dropped dangerously. He leaned closer to the friend.

The friend leaned back. “Of course not.”

Mr. Cole relaxed a little. “That’s the right answer. She is nothing. She is no one.”

“But between her and the father—”

“I know of him. I research all the players and find their weak points. He’s a hack reporter no one listens to at a pathetic local rag in Crandall Park. *Crandall Park*. They couldn’t afford an office in Financial, or at least Lincoln Square, and you’re worried about them? I have ways of suppressing the media. Their voice will be silenced, like the rest.”

“But his specialty—”

“If either of the Beaulieus try anything, they will learn their place.”

The friend didn’t look convinced but he stepped away anyway, his arms crossed. He glowered, looking upset, at the wall.

Mr. Cole turned back to Boyd and frowned, staring at him intently. For a moment, all he did was look Boyd up and down, and Boyd stared back, wide-eyed. Then Mr. Cole leaned back with a shake of his head.

“You said your name is Boyd, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Which means you’re a boy?”

“Yes, sir.”

Mr. Cole laughed but it sounded harsh to Boyd, like he didn’t mean it as a nice thing. “That French devil can’t do anything right, can she? Look at this.” He looked at the friend as he gestured at Boyd. “She couldn’t even give birth to a normal boy. What an embarrassment. You honestly fear a failure like that?”

Boyd didn’t know what to say to that so he stayed quiet. The friend must have had the same thought because he only shook his head with tightened lips.

“What are you doing here?” Mr. Cole’s voice had an edge.

Boyd hesitantly pointed past them to the corner. “My backpack is in here, sir. I would like to get it and leave, please.”

“You aren’t going anywhere.” Mr. Cole stood and the tall man let go of Boyd. Mr. Cole walked closer to Boyd, dropping his hands on Boyd’s shoulders. He crouched in front of him and smiled, but it didn’t look like a smile to Boyd. It looked like a threat. “Not until we have a chance to talk.”

“Okay,” Boyd said quietly.

“Good boy.” Mr. Cole shook Boyd lightly. “You see this friend behind me?”

Boyd looked over Mr. Cole’s shoulder to the friend, who did not look very happy. Boyd nodded.

“Have you seen my friend and me together before?”

Boyd hesitated, not knowing what the right answer was. Mr. Cole’s grip grew painful.

“It’s important you tell the truth, Boyd. I need you to do that for me.”

“...I have.”

Instantly, Boyd wondered if he shouldn’t have said that. Mr. Cole’s expression grew very dark. The friend behind him stepped back quickly and looked sick.

“Have you, now?” Mr. Cole said nicely. He did not look nice, though, nor did the smile he gave Boyd. “When?”

“Um.” Boyd didn’t want to answer, but then the very tall man crowded Boyd from behind, cutting him off from the open door. Mr. Cole’s stare drilled into him.

“Remember,” said Mr. Cole, “you’ll be in trouble if you don’t tell the truth.”

Boyd tangled his hands in his shirt even harder. “I se—I’ve seen you a lot of times. You come into rooms back here.”

Mr. Cole’s smile grew sharper. The friend turned away and bowed his head. His hands went up to his face, but Boyd didn’t understand why.

“And what did you see us do in those times, Boyd?”

“I don’t know,” Boyd hedged, and Mr. Cole shook him once. Boyd rocked back against the tall man’s legs. “Are you sure you don’t know, Boyd? I will be very angry if I find out you didn’t tell me the truth. You won’t be in trouble if you are honest. Your provincial parents have taught you that much at least, have they not? How to tell the truth?”

Boyd nodded quickly, because they had. His dad always said it was better to be honest about being wrong than it was to lie and pretend to be right. And his mother always said only the weak lied to cover their mistakes. She said a truly strong person would accept responsibility for their actions instead of blaming everyone else.

“Alright. Then tell the truth.”

“Well.” Boyd snuck a glance at the friend. He had dropped back down to sit, turned away. “Well, you mostly talk about things I don’t understand. But you give each other things, sometimes. Papers you sometimes destroy before you leave and packages and other presents. And you talk a lot about the money you made since last time you met, because of what you traded.”

Mr. Cole’s smile froze in place and then fell. A nerve ticked in his jaw. He turned very dark and sharp eyes up to the tall man.

The friend slumped forward with a low groan. “I told you this was a bad place to meet,” he whispered.

“This is the perfect place,” Mr. Cole said sharply to the friend without turning his eyes to him. “No one questions our presence. No one uses this building. My plan was the right one. The child is at

fault.”

Boyd thought he was now in very big trouble, even though he had never understood what they said when they met. But he was used to being told things were his fault, so even though he didn't understand what was happening now or when he overheard them, at least there was some relief in knowing that this much wasn't different.

If it was his fault, it was easy. Apologize and disappear.

That always worked.

“I'm sorry.” Boyd looked down at the floor.

“You should be,” said Mr. Cole.

The tall man pressed even harder against Boyd's back, making him feel trapped. Mr. Cole dug his fingers deep into Boyd's skin, and it hurt. The nice smile and friendly voice was gone; now he glared and sounded scary.

“Do you know who I am?”

Boyd pulled hard at his shirt's hem. “You're—You're Mr. Cole, Austin's father.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Cole very darkly. “And I'm also someone important. Very, very important in this country. Unlike your worthless mother, unlike your drudge father, I am someone who this country needs.”

Boyd nodded, not knowing what else to do.

“And as someone very important, I can make important decisions.” Mr. Cole's eyes felt like they were going to pull Boyd in and never let him leave. “Do you know what ‘deportation’ means?”

Boyd shook his head.

“It means there are people living in this country who don't deserve the right to be here. They came here even though no one wants them. Do you know where your mother is from?”

“France,” Boyd said quietly.

“France.” Mr. Cole's fingers felt like they were going to break through Boyd's skin and maybe go down to his bones. “Your mother is a dirty traitor to this country. Her people are our enemies. She is an enemy. But she is allowed to stay right now because this great country gives even backstabbers like her a second chance. But that can change if I want it to.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” said Mr. Cole as he drew closer, “that if I tell them to, someone will come for your mother. They will take her away and you will never see her again.”

Boyd sucked in a breath. His mother could disappear, just like that?

“They will send her back to France,” said Mr. Cole, “and the French are heathens. They might kill her for having lived in an enemy country in the middle of a war. Do you want that?”

Boyd felt like maybe he couldn't breathe properly with the idea of this new, horrible reality spanning before him. He shook his head quickly.

“And your hack father, do you know where he is from?” Mr. Cole didn't wait for Boyd to

answer. “He is from Canada. If I get very angry, I can send him back there, too. He doesn’t deserve the right to be in this great country for the sin of marrying your mother alone. If I tell the same people who take your mom, you will never see him again, either. You’ll be left all alone here with no one to care for you and no one to love you. Is that what you want?”

“No.” Boyd watched Mr. Cole with very wide eyes. “They would—they would leave me instead of bringing me?”

“You wouldn’t belong with them. You wouldn’t belong anywhere. No one would want the leftovers of traitors like them.”

Boyd struggled not to rip his shirt in his fear. “I don’t want that.”

Mr. Cole’s smile was back. He released his hands and looped one arm around Boyd’s upper back. “I don’t want that, either. I want to leave your family alone. But I need you to help me.”

“How?”

“By not telling anyone—*anyone*, not any of your little friends, especially not your parents—about my friend and me.” He gestured to the friend who was still not looking over. “We come to these rooms because we have important things to discuss and we need them to stay a secret to everyone. You know what a secret is, right? You aren’t that dense?”

“I know what a secret is.”

“Good.” Mr. Cole was very close. “And you can keep one, right?”

Boyd perked up. “I’m good at keeping secrets.”

And he was. He was very good at being quiet and not saying any of the things that would upset others. Even if that meant not telling about something that had happened.

“You had better be. Because if I hear you’ve told anyone about this, about us, I will have them take your mother away immediately. She will be gone before you even get home. And if you tell your father, you’ll never see him again, either. If you don’t tell anyone, you get to keep your family. It’s so simple even someone like you should understand. Do you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you believe me when I say I will take away your family?”

“I do, sir.”

Mr. Cole’s smile was a little less frightening this time. “Good.” He rocked Boyd lightly, maybe it was supposed to be friendly?, and then stood. He brushed off the knees of his nice pants. “Then I expect to never see you in these rooms again.”

“Yes, sir.”

Mr. Cole stared down at him, and the tall man was very close, and Boyd stared back up, and they all stood there for a long moment.

Mr. Cole’s eyes narrowed. “Leave.”

Boyd felt the tall man drop a hand onto his head, felt himself start to be pulled backward. “Um.”

Mr. Cole did not look friendly anymore. “What.”

"I'm sorry, Mr. Cole, but I need my backpack?"

The storm on Mr. Cole's face lessened. "Ah. Yes." He looked at the tall man and said nothing, but the tall man seemed to understand. The tall man walked to the corner where Boyd's backpack was shoved under an old table, and he pulled it out and brought it back. When he handed it to Boyd, maybe he didn't realize his own strength because he almost knocked Boyd over from the power of pushing it against his chest.

Boyd stumbled and caught himself on the doorway. After hesitating a moment, watching them watch him, Boyd turned and started down the hallway.

"Remember what I said," Mr. Cole called from behind him. "Or you know what will happen. If you don't believe me, you will regret it for the rest of your miserable little life."

Boyd did believe him, and so Boyd knew this was serious.

The door shut. The whole time Boyd walked down the abandoned hallway toward the front door, he worried and worried about what Mr. Cole said.

Boyd knew it was true that Mr. Cole was very powerful. Austin never forgot to make sure Boyd knew that. He was someone high up in the government; the sort of person everyone listened to when he said things like, "Take that woman away."

Everyone else's parents at this school were much more powerful or important than Boyd's parents. The other kids liked to remind him of it, of how much less he was than them.

Mr. Cole wasn't the first person who told Boyd how bad his mother was for being French, either. A lot of people said a lot of bad things about her, because no one liked her. They said he was bad, too, because he was her son. Because he was half French, himself.

Did that make him half a traitor too?

Did that make him half an enemy of everyone else?

What would he do if Mr. Cole got mad and took away his mother and dad? What would he do if he was left all alone?

The very thought was enough to make all words dry up in his throat. It was enough to make him speed his steps so he could be home sooner; see his mother and dad and feel better making sure they were there, they were *there*, Mr. Cole hadn't taken them away already.

Boyd stepped out into what he thought of as the 'quiet sunlight;' one of those days where the clouds were heavy but the sky wasn't dark, and everywhere he looked he could see easily but everything also felt dull and hollow.

This area of Windsor Carlisle almost never had anyone around, which was why Boyd had first been confused by Mr. Cole and his friend going into the building. But now that Boyd thought about it, he may have seen Mr. Cole's friend around other times, too. Maybe he was another kid's father. Boyd didn't know anyone at the school in detail, because most people didn't want anything to do with him.

He was used to walking all the way past the other buildings and out to the front gate in silence, which was why he was surprised when he heard someone calling his name.

"Boyd! Where'd you go?"

He rounded the corner of Franklin Hall and saw Lou jogging across the green space of the

courtyard. He waved when he saw Boyd, and didn't stop running until he had slowed and stopped at Boyd's side.

His blond hair was very curly, and his eyes were very blue. He grinned.

"Why are you here?" Boyd asked in confusion.

Lou shrugged and grabbed Boyd's hand. "Come on. Your dad's looking for you. You're coming to my birthday party tomorrow, right?"

"Of course I am."

Lou smiled brilliantly. He pulled Boyd along at his side. "You don't have to get me anything."

"My mother says it's inappropriate to attend a birthday party without—"

Lou scrunched up his face. "I don't care what she says. I say I just want you to come."

"Is that why you waited around and found me?"

Lou rolled his eyes. "You're dumb," he announced, and walked faster.

As they passed the main building, they saw Austin and his friends hanging around out front. Lou scowled at him and Austin made a face back, but neither of them said anything because there were too many adults around. Boyd tried not to look at Austin because it never ended well when he did. Today he was scared he would get his parents in trouble if he even glanced at a Cole.

At the front gates, Boyd saw his dad talking very intensely to the security guards who didn't let anyone past the gates who wasn't supposed to be there. The guard was frowning as he looked at Boyd's dad.

"Found him, Mr. Beaulieu!" Lou yelled triumphantly, and when Boyd's dad turned around with big eyes, Lou lifted Boyd's hand above their heads and waved.

Boyd's dad rushed across the space between them, and grabbed Boyd in a hug.

"Where were you? I came early to talk to Ms. Callaway—"

Why did he talk to the principal?, Boyd wondered in alarm.

"—and when I came out they said you'd already left class and were nowhere to be seen. I've been worried sick! Are you okay? What happened?"

When Boyd's dad held him by the shoulders and moved him backward, it wasn't scary or painful like when Mr. Cole did it. It felt good, because it was always accompanied by his dad looking him right in the eyes and saying things like Boyd mattered to him.

"I'm sorry." Boyd peered up at his dad, trying to figure out how he was supposed to tell the truth like his parents wanted without making his parents go away. "I had to get my bag."

Boyd's dad's eyebrows moved all around and his eyes looked kind of wet, but then he hugged Boyd close again. Boyd's cheek was pressed against his dad's stomach. He felt and even heard the rise and fall of his breath and it was very comforting. In front of him, he saw Lou standing close, blocking his view of Austin and the others.

He wished he could live the rest of his life like this.

"Okay, but next time, tell someone where you're going." Boyd's dad did not sound angry, which

was good. "I was scared."

Boyd looked up as best he could. "You were scared?"

"Yes, of course." Boyd's dad's eyes were very warm and brown as they looked down at Boyd. His arms were also warm around Boyd, and gentle. "I'm scared any time I think something happened to you."

Boyd considered that as he stretched his hands as much as he could around his dad's back.

"Are you scared I'll go away and never come back?"

"Yes. I don't want to think about it. I would be devastated, Boyd. I would be very, very sad."

So that meant his dad also would be scared and sad if he was taken from Boyd, and Boyd knew they would both be scared and sad if his mother was taken. That meant Boyd had made the right choice by not saying anything about Mr. Cole, just like Mr. Cole said.

It wasn't a lie if he didn't say anything, then. It was being a good son.

Boyd's dad shifted his arms so one looped behind Boyd's head and held him by his other shoulder, and he started to lead Boyd out the front gates. Lou trotted along at his side.

"Are you coming over?" Boyd asked him.

Lou flashed a grin. "Yeah! I brought a toy I think you'll like." He waited until Boyd's dad was looking away to talk to the guard before he leaned in with a mischievous smirk. "It makes a really loud noise. I think it'll make your mom mad."

"Then shouldn't we not bring it?"

"Bring what?" Boyd's dad asked as they walked away from the guard.

Lou looked up with wide, innocent eyes. "Nothing, Mr. Beaulieu. Just some candy I have from home. Boyd's weird about candy and doesn't want it."

Boyd made a face.

Boyd's dad lit up. He beamed at Lou as he leaned over Boyd's head. "Lou, my child, my long lost son, that candy will be lost on my son and his horrible taste buds, but I am definitely interested. In fact! I'll buy us a whole bunch of candy on the way home if you help me eat it!"

This time it was Lou who lit up. He straightened his back and got a jump in his step.

"Really?"

"Yes, really. I can't have anything sweet at home most of the time because the rest of my family is boring."

"I'm not boring," Boyd said indignantly.

"You don't like sweets." Boyd's dad looked down at him and shook his head, rocking Boyd against him as they walked. "It's a very sad state of affairs. I never thought my child would betray me this way, but it's true."

"Yeah, who doesn't like sweets?" Lou asked with a laugh. "Boyd's so weird!"

"So weird," Boyd's dad agreed sadly. "I don't know what to do."

"I know," Lou enthused. "Let's get a cake too!"

"A cake!" Boyd's dad grinned. "A whole cake for just you and me? Should I make it an early birthday present for you?"

"Yeah and a pie too! And also some donuts!"

"If we're going that far, let's get ice cream, too!"

"Ice cream!"

Boyd's dad and Boyd's only friend continued to talk excitedly about all the different sweet things they would eat. Caught between the two of them and their enthusiasm, Boyd tried to focus on their grins and laughter, but all he could think about was Mr. Cole with his dark eyes and his dark words, telling Boyd how easy it would be for him to lose everyone he loved.

Three

Friday, June 24, 2005

Lexington, PA

"Come on, come on," Julian muttered under his breath. "Turn..."

The sandwich bag crinkled with every shift of his ass, which had fallen asleep long ago. He longed to step out of the car and stretch until every vertebra popped, but he couldn't until Junko fucking turned already.

Just as she started to tilt her lovely little head, the jackass who'd been courting her from the bar finally won. Junko's whole back shifted to Julian and she was soon out of his sight as the two of them headed upstairs.

Julian scoffed and tossed his camera to the empty passenger seat. Just great. The *one* time he wasn't on cheater duty he got a perfect shot. He snagged the remnants of his sandwich out of the bag and moodily chewed it, glowering out the window.

He was about to consider sleeping when he heard his phone trill. He hardly glanced at the name on the screen before bringing it up to his ear.

"Hey Fin," he said around a mouthful.

There was a distinctly displeased pause. "I told you not to call me that."

"What? But everyone else calls you it. You're saying I'm not blue enough for your brotherhood? You wound me."

He could imagine the eye roll he got out of that one.

"Were you at your office Wednesday night about 2230?"

"Depends. Am I being accused of something?"

Another obvious eye roll without a sound. The man's silences were impressive.

"There was a rape down the block," Finley said.

"Stranger, I take it?"

"Got it in one. I'm looking for suspect info."

Julian balled up the wrapper and tossed it to the passenger floor. He thought back to the night as he cracked his neck, first one way and then the other. *Pop, pop* went his spine.

"Where exactly?"

"Alley off Claremore."

Julian drummed his fingers on the dash. "I had a stakeout at North Ridge that night. I came by maybe 2200 to pick up some stuff but didn't see anything at the time. Sorry, man. I can keep a lookout, though. What'd the vic say he looked like?"

"She couldn't," Finley said flatly. "She's blind."

"Oh for fuck's sake," Julian growled.

Any kind of rapist was on Julian's shit list of despicable people who he would love to see fucked over in court, or on the street if that was better. *Any* kind. It didn't matter to Julian who the vic was; that asshole deserved castrating. The way Julian saw it, and the way he knew Finley saw it, it was bad enough hurting someone who at least had a fighting chance of getting you caught. It was especially chickenshit to prey on anyone who came into the situation with circumstances they couldn't control that were used against them.

This definitely fell into that category.

"I want to get this asshole but I've got shit to go on right now," Finley said tightly. "The way it happened, she didn't have a chance of getting details. No way of knowing height, weight, race, age... Smoker's voice and fast on his feet. Smelled like sweat. Strong. That's it."

"There's probably a hundred guys in a five block radius that fit that description."

"I know."

Julian scrubbed a hand over his face and let out a harsh breath. His knees knocked up against the steering wheel. "Well, I'll keep an eye out for general rapist assholes, then. Get you some good shots if I see anyone even remotely suspicious. You think it's going to be a trend?"

"Yeah. I've been checking MOs. I think this guy's hit before, some vulnerable adults. The others in my unit said—" Finley's voice quaked with withheld anger before subsiding. "With the new standing orders, they don't want to do jack all for investigations lately. Everything's case closed exceptional first chance they get so they don't get their asses thrown out the door or, for others, so they can sit around taking bribes all day. You know how these fuckers are—the world's gone to shit so who cares about an extra rape or two? And the others who aren't like that, they say to pick your battles. Tell me to let it go when I'm told to let it go, so I can stick around and solve other crimes. You know the shit they say. But fuck them, I'm finding this asshole and I'm taking him in."

Julian did know. There was a lot of political upheaval in Lexington PD when the brass disappeared in the bombs. Bureaucracy took over and fucked up everyone's lives. Finley had told Julian how, suddenly after the bombs, the cops were told left and right how they had to drop cases even with good leads, or how they weren't allowed to investigate some at all. Any time he asked, he was told the order came from "higher up" but no one seemed to know who, or *what*, that meant.

Added to that, after the bombs hit there was more crime and fewer communities that wanted to work with the cops, which meant some areas of Lexington went to shit real fast. People got paranoid from outside LPD, thought all the cops were corrupt, all the cops didn't care, but internally there were a hell of a lot of them who weren't corrupt, who did care. But they were silenced by their own superiors, and all the cops who were assholes who let the injustices slide got promoted higher and higher, while all the good cops who tried to fight the system were iced out no matter what they did.

Some units of LPD, Finley said, were like the Wild West. Others had well-intentioned people getting worn down by orders they didn't understand. The bad cops were having a hell of a party in this atmosphere. Fucking up everyone's lives right and left. The good cops learned to shut up so they could keep their jobs, still do what they could. Still try to help the people right in front of them as long as possible.

Thing was, if there was one thing Patrick Finley was, it was a good cop who refused to back down from what he thought was right, whether or not it was the popular choice.

Probably was going to get the guy killed someday.

“Well. You know I’ll help you, Sarge.”

“Good.” Finley hung up abruptly.

Julian snorted and tossed his phone on the passenger seat. Typical cop brusqueness. Just the facts, ma’am, and not even a tickle and a farewell at the end.

He decided to drive back to the office for a bit, maybe swing by the alley. He saw plenty of suspicious perps but no one who vibed as the asshole rapist. Then again, how was he to know at first glance? He’d have to stake it out a bit. Get closer, listen to voices, look for smokes. If nothing else he’d probably end up with another hooker or two to let detox in his office overnight away from their abusive (insert whatever here).

He used to try not to feel jaded about life, not to make sweeping generalizations, but he’d found it nigh impossible since the war.

The morning shift around this place had become rough in the past few years. Half of the prostitutes seemed a step away from Ferals. Some of the roughest hookers were targeted by the few businessmen who stopped for a quickie in the Barrows on the way to work, like the war never happened in their lala-land minds. How those rich bastards could pretend the city hadn’t fallen to shit around them, Julian would never know. But maybe it was easy when you still acted like your white picket fence and 2.5 kids in the elitist neighborhoods was all that mattered—and if the rest of the skyscrapers were rubble around yours then, well, that’s what those poor people got for not trying hard enough. Or not running away from the bombs fast enough.

He still gave Cedrick shit for living in Jackass Central up in Cedar Hills.

Either way, it was the people on the streets who paid the price of that arrogance. They were the ones trafficked, the ones hurt, the ones dying. And they were the ones who didn’t have a choice, or felt like they had no choice, and so they returned again and again to the very same streets that would kill them.

Julian had seen it happen too many times to count. He’d stepped over too many bodies and walked in on too many ODs. He’d woken too many mornings to find the person he’d tried to save the night before dead on the couch.

After awhile, it was hard not to see the end game in those thousand yard stares. After awhile, it was hard to believe there would ever be another ending to that story.

The hallway was empty when he entered the building and stopped in front of his locked office door. He fumbled for his keys. Behind him, the door to Oswald Insurance, Co. made the god-awful screeching noise it made every time it opened. Mrs. Yells A Lot upstairs was probably never going to fix it, and Marie from Oswald had apparently not yet invested in a home remedy. Julian once again made a Note To Self to attack that thing with WD-40 next time he found a bottle.

He glanced over his shoulder, expecting Marie’s patted-down brown hair and Everywoman Smile, and was surprised to see a man he recognized instead. He turned around entirely to take him in.

“Investing in insurance?” Julian asked mildly.

Bell snorted and shut the door behind him. “Waiting for you to return, more like.”

The man had the best voice. Like deep velvet with just enough of a rumble for quirk. Coupled with the clear, dark eyes, wide shoulders and strong build... It could make a guy weak in the knees, if he were of that persuasion. And if Bell were too.

Pity the man wasn't.

Julian glanced over Bell's shoulder. "Marie let you in?"

"No, Linda."

"Good God, your voice is the magic touch if that woman let you in."

Bell chuckled, and goddamn that was a nice, low rumble too. The grin that flashed across his features was even brighter against his smooth, dark skin. "You just need to learn some finesse, Julian."

I'll show you 'finesse,' Julian thought, but knew enough not to say it aloud. For all that he sometimes (okay; *really* often) wanted to grab the man and kiss the hell out of him, he knew a straight shooter when he saw one. And his damn obnoxious schoolgirl crush on Bell was never going to go away or find fruition.

Them's the breaks when you're too open to gender.

Julian sighed more heavily than necessary, and turned back to his door. It was five seconds and a lot of awkward awareness of Bell's warm presence behind him before he could get inside and acquire some space between them.

Fuck Cedrick and his literal hot ass friends, anyway.

Bell settled gracefully into the chair in front of Julian's desk. The chair had been dragged out of a garbage years earlier and looked like shit most of the time, but Bell made it look good.

Then again, Bell made everything look good.

Julian, meanwhile, dropped his gangly ass into his rolling piece of shit chair and barely managed not to fall backward in the process. He folded his hands across his stomach and pretended that hadn't almost happened. He was about 90% sure he was convincing.

"So, what's up?"

"Have you seen Cedrick lately?"

Figured tall, dark and sexy was here for his friend. No one ever visited Julian just to say hi. It was always about getting this or that info from him because they knew if anyone could get it, he could. Woe was him and the life of an awesome PI.

"Not for several weeks. Why?"

A rumble of a 'hmm.'

Fuck's sake, man. Just bottle that shit up and sell it as pheromones, already.

"He's been... interesting lately."

"Like, wearing Vivienne's finest to the ball interesting, or flipped his shit interesting?"

Bell's lips lifted on the side; a slow burn of a smile. "I was thinking 'a bit secretive,' but your interpretations are interesting too."

That's not all that's interesting about me. Julian wondered if that thought could be read in his

smirk. He hoped it did and he hoped it flustered that fucker the way every shift of the man's mouth did Julian.

"Have you called the guy? He's your BFF lately. Pretty sure he'd answer."

"Ahh, Julian. Are you jealous?"

"Maybe a little. A PI needs some love now and then, too."

"If you need a hug, I'm right here." Bell opened his arms and grinned.

"I'll take a rain check and double down on the offer."

Bell chuckled. "Increasing my offer without asking. Interesting plan."

"Important question: is anything *not* interesting to you?"

Bell's teeth flashed. "Certainly not you."

Julian stared at him. *Damn*. He dropped his crossed arms onto the edge of the desk. "I give. You win."

"What do I win?"

"My devotion and an answer, free of charge. What's the question again?"

Bell had that small smile at first, his gaze heavy on Julian, but it faded and all the weight of his worries settled back onto him. His shoulders drooped and the lines on his face suddenly became evident. With a sigh, he leaned forward, elbows on his knees and hands folded in front of him. It was a testament to how serious Bell seemed that Julian didn't even check out his package.

"Will you check in on Cedrick?"

"Why me?"

"Because he trusts you."

Julian almost laughed. "Like he doesn't trust you? Dude built a secret society of truth nerds with *you*, not me. If you think something strange is happening, I'd think he'd talk to you first."

"I don't know." Bell's gaze drifted, caught, drifted again, and landed on the grimy glass window to Julian's office. The black pressed letters reading 'JJ Investigations' shone faintly, backwards.

Julian sighed. Let it never be said he wasn't a sucker for a damsel or dude in distress. He dragged a pad of paper over and flicked on his favorite pen. "Fine. Give me the deets."

"What?"

Julian watched him from beneath his eyebrows. "What's giving you the chills?"

Bell stared at him a moment, but before Julian clarified again, Bell spoke. "I noticed at the last Guild meeting. He was late." He saw Julian's eyebrows quirk and nodded. "You know him. That isn't usual. He was distracted the whole time and left the second it was over. I called him later to see if he had a new lead. He said he couldn't talk."

"Well," Julian said mildly. "That's the most alarming part right there. I usually have a hard time shutting the guy up."

"You joke, but..."

"I know. So, anything else?"

"Little things." The slide of Bell's shoulders up and down was a thing of beauty. "He missed a stakeout, but he'd said ahead of time Vivienne might be gone that night and he'd have to stay with Boyd if so. I figured she'd gotten caught at work. Another day he didn't answer his phone when I called on a secure line; later said he'd been at work and couldn't get somewhere private to talk. With anyone else none of this would matter, but..."

"But it's Ced. I get it." Julian tapped the pen on the desk as he stared at his notes, his mind already racing through possibilities and ways to prove it. "Tell you what. We're about due for a beer. I'll invite him out, keep an eye open for anything weird. I get a vibe, I'll tell you."

"Thank you."

Bell had a damn good poker face when he needed it but this must not have been one of those times, because the relief was clear as day. It made Julian feel a little warm and fuzzy inside. It probably wasn't an entirely altruistic or innocent feeling.

"No problem."

They both stood at the same time in one of those weird unspoken rules where their brains saw all the minute movements of the other's body and responded without translating it fully to thought. And then came the requisite awkward moment where they both stood there, not sure how to go about parting ways with a giant ass desk, an acquaintanceship, and a probably pretty-damn-obvious one-way mancrush between them.

Julian fiddled with the paper and pen and hated himself a little for it.

"I should go," Bell said. "My shift starts soon."

Because you have to be a goddamn doctor on top of everything else. Fucking perfect men.

"You know where to find me," was all Julian said.

"And you me." Bell moved that god-awful chair aside and once again made it look about a thousand times better than Julian ever would. But then he hesitated. "Do you think Cedrick will avoid you?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"I thought you stayed in contact more often. But if you haven't heard from him in weeks, it might be tied into this."

"Yeahhh..." Julian rubbed the back of his head and canted his gaze away. "He may or may not be pissed at me for saying he needed to get his shit together for his kid."

Bell said nothing, but in that silence he said a lot.

Julian frowned and turned his gaze back to Bell. "He needs to stop letting Vivi-dear control things, that's all I'm saying."

Bell shook his head slightly to himself and turned to leave. Julian didn't let him get to the door. He swung around the desk and headed toward him.

"Come on, man. You have to have an opinion on this. You've met her."

Bell paused with his hand on the doorknob and looked back. "Everyone has an opinion on

Vivienne but none of us know the context. I don't have near the information to develop an opinion, and to get it I'd need to violate my friend's privacy. So I won't. I trust Cedrick has a reason for all he does, and it's only right to extend the courtesy to his family, too."

Julian scoffed. "Can't form an opinion until you know all the facts; typical Guilder. And God forbid you get involved. He could just be blinded by love, you know. Wouldn't be the first time in the history of the human race."

There was a pause, and then: "We've told you not to call us that."

"And I've told you I don't care. It rolls off the tongue. Guilder. I like it. Besides, I name all my cases to remember them better."

"And we're your case?"

"Ask me enough questions, you may as well be. I should get a line identifying me as a contributor in one of your editions."

"I don't think you truly want that."

"No," Julian said more soberly. "I don't."

Bell nodded. "Keep in touch."

Julian made a salute with two fingers to his forehead and a flick away. "Sure thing, Indiana."

Bell was about out the door but paused and looked back at him.

"What would that make you?" Bell eyed him, looking him very closely up and down. "Virginia?"

Julian lifted his nose. "Massachusetts, I'll have you know."

Bell's smile was easy. "My mistake."

"Yep. Now get your ass out of my office before I have to come up with a realistic threat."

"Well," Bell drawled as he stepped through the doorway. "Wouldn't want to put you out."

Julian eyed him. Did he know what he was doing? He had to know what he was doing.

Fucker.

He shut the door in Bell's face and felt briefly vindicated, until he heard that low, rumbling laugh again. Wanting to simultaneously kiss and punch someone was unfortunately not a new experience for Julian, and he had yet to come up with an ideal solution. The only solution he really had was Kris because at least that fulfilled half the urge.

He strode back to his desk and dragged out one of the lower drawers. It was heavy as sin and always protested noisily when it was moved.

"Too bad," he told it sourly, and snatched his phone from the depths. It was only a handful of seconds while the phone rang but he felt on edge and impatient, so when Kris picked up Julian wanted to ask what the hell he'd been doing, going to Antarctica and back before answering? Or maybe the goddamn fucking moon?

"Hey," he said instead. "It's me."

Kris yawned. He had probably been asleep. He was always asleep. But no matter how tired he

was and no matter the time of day, the thing that was easy about Kris was he never asked questions, he always knew what Julian wanted, and he never expected anything from Julian that Julian wasn't willing to give or expecting in return.

"My place or yours?" Kris asked.

"Yours." Julian's gaze lingered annoyingly on the ugly chair before jerking away. "I need a break."

There was a pause, and then Kris laughed.

"What?" Julian demanded.

"Bell was there, wasn't he?" Kris asked knowingly. Annoyingly smug. "You only ever sound that cockblocked when he—"

"I'll be there in twenty, asshole. You better be ready."

Julian hung up on him. That felt good, too.

Four

*Saturday June 25, 2005
Icebox, Industrial District
Lexington, PA*

“Why the hell you gotta bring me to these shit-ass places, Ced?” Julian dropped onto a barstool. “You’re gonna be that cheap, you may as well bring me to a liquor store where I can get some fucking Kamchatka for the same price.”

Icebox was as seedy as ever, and Julian swore to God he saw a good dozen of his former cases walking across the room. He was probably going to end up in the background of twenty more of his colleagues’ shots. Christ.

Cedrick laughed, as amused by Julian’s pain as ever. Bastard.

“I should remove you as a friend,” Julian grumbled, dragging the mug of beer over that Cedrick offered him. He studiously ignored the glare from the bartender.

Whatever. Julian couldn’t be bothered to care at the moment.

“You’re in an unusually cheerful mood tonight.” Cedrick sipped the god-awful beer he’d gotten on tap. With Innocent Face Beaulieu™ in full swing, he looked expectantly at Julian and his equally disgusting beer.

Julian snorted. Like he was really going to imbibe such a monstrosity as the drink he’d been offered. He looked down at the amber liquid with a scowl, and drank half of it in great gulps. He scrunched his face up dramatically and earned an outright scowl from the bartender now. He was going to get himself banned at this rate.

“You’re going to get us kicked out.”

There Ceddy went, reading his mind again. Julian huffed out a great sigh and slouched forward.

“Sorry, Crane,” Julian muttered to the bartender.

Crane didn’t seem mollified at all; with a scoff, he threw a rag over his shoulder and stalked to the other end of the bar where one of Julian’s past cases was trying to get the bartender’s attention.

Julian ran his eye over the customer, automatically pulling up the details in his mind. Ted Wilkins, 45 years old. Married with kids, until wife Janice noticed his “late nights at work” started getting a little too common and a little too long. She asked Julian to see if there was another woman, and after two weeks of surveillance Julian came back with the answer: there wasn’t another woman. There was another man. Surprisingly (to Julian, at least), Janice was relieved and paid Julian a bonus as thanks. A month later, Julian saw the three having a grand old time together at Jake and Janet’s. A happy ending, for once; insofar as Julian ever got in his job.

“What’s wrong?” Cedrick’s low voice pulled at Julian’s thoughts, and he returned his attention to his friend’s concerned face. The sad thing was, he was the one supposed to be asking the question of Ced. But Cedrick was the sort that always got to it first. Never stopped looking out for his friends, caring about them, their well-being... but didn’t always seem to turn that same observant eye on himself.

Julian felt inexplicably depressed at the idea, and downed the rest of his drink. He waited for Crane to glance back their way again, so he could gesture for a refill. Crane complied while scowling the whole time. He looked like an extra in a biker gang movie, in Julian's solid and thoroughly unbiased opinion. While waiting for the glass to fill with the dubious excuse for alcohol, Julian studied Cedrick.

He looked tired, maybe—or not totally focused. It was subtle, but Julian noticed it, after having been friends for years. He saw it in the way Cedrick's fingertips tapped the edge of his mug in a nervous pattern, and how his gaze strayed from Julian before returning. His usual good posture was strained now, and the darkness under his eyes spoke of more than one late night.

Beer spilled over the rim when Crane slid the mug back to Julian, who barely caught it before it crashed into his chest. He nodded his thanks to Crane, and jerked his chin away from the bar. Understanding without words being needed, Cedrick followed Julian to one of the booths as far from the rest of the skeezy crowd as Julian could manage.

They settled into the seats (Julian felt something disgustingly sticky catch on the ass of his jeans and resolved to burn them when he got home) and dragged the drinks in front of them. Julian kicked his legs out in front of him, knocking against Cedrick's shin in the process.

"Sorry, man," Julian said easily and Cedrick shrugged.

"You can't help your beanpole legs."

This time, the kick was deliberate.

A faint smile lifted Cedrick's lips but it wasn't with the usual enthusiastic grace. No light made it to his brown eyes and his gaze dropped to his drink unusually quickly. Julian remembered Bell's words from the other day:

He's been... interesting lately. Secretive.

Julian opened his mouth to ask but before he could, Cedrick spoke.

"So? Something on your mind that even Kris couldn't fix?"

Julian's stared at Cedrick, his mouth working as all previous thoughts rushed out of his mind. "What?"

"Usually you're in a good mood after a day with Kris," Cedrick said with a shrug. "You're not today, though. What's wrong?"

Julian couldn't decide whether he was surprised, impressed, or disturbed, and he was sure the indecision must be reflected in his fluctuating expression. He finally settled on drawn eyebrows and a flicker of a scowl. "How the fuck do you know where I was? You stalking me, Beaulieu?"

Cedrick rolled his eyes and leaned back in his seat with one arm listed against the back of the booth. There was a definite smug curve to his lips. "You're wearing your Friday jeans on a Saturday, your shirt is rumpled despite how you obviously tried to smooth it, and I can see a hickey by your collar."

Julian wasn't used to being on the receiving end of the kind perceptive bastard he usually was to others, and found he didn't much like it.

Accurately reading huffiness in Julian's silence, a flicker of a smile crossed Ced's features.

"One would think I was the PI and you were the journalist," Cedrick said.

"I dunno, Ced. I've come to the conclusion that journalists are more alarmingly nosy and freakishly observant than any PI I've ever met."

"You're basing that off of me?" Cedrick asked in amusement. "Or did you find another best friend journalist when I wasn't looking?"

"Bell's included in the deal."

Cedrick laughed. "He's a doctor."

"That's not all he is!"

"Yeah, yeah, keep it in your pants."

Julian pointed triumphantly at Cedrick. "See?"

Cedrick tilted his head. "What?"

"I never told you I joned for the dude, but you know without having to ask! I'm telling you. You're freakier than your family, sometimes. And that's damn impressive, with an alien kid and a robot wife."

Cedrick kicked Julian with no heat. "Hey. That's my family you're talking about."

"Yeah, I know. They could only be *your* family, seeing as I don't know anyone else crazy enough to marry a woman like that and pop out a little alien."

"Would you stop calling Boyd an alien already?" Irritation and defensiveness was beginning to creep into Cedrick's tone and Julian held his hands up in a gesture of peace.

"Whoa, sorry. I was joking. You know I am. I like that kid, all outer space oddities aside."

"And stop insulting Vivienne. You just don't understand her."

"No one does but you, Ced." At Cedrick's straightening back, Julian held up a hand. "That isn't an insult. I think she doesn't let anyone else see who she really is except around you."

"That's your investigative assessment?"

Julian shrugged and leaned back against the booth. It squeaked alarmingly, considering it was hard as fucking stone. "You could say that, yeah. I've seen enough people in my day who are like her... show one face to the world, and another to the only people they trust. Most people aren't as selective in their trust as she is, but I know she has to show you something I never see or else you'd never love the woman the way you do. I know you. You wouldn't stay with someone who wasn't a hell of a lot more honorable and good than how we normally see her."

"She *is* a good person," Cedrick said quietly, his gaze dropping to his beer. It was nearly gone, but he still stared at it. He looked strangely sad, until Julian noticed that the color was almost exactly the same shade of gold as Boyd's eyes. He wondered if Cedrick was thinking about the last time they'd seen each other, when Julian had rather harshly told Cedrick to get his shit together and stand up against Vivienne for not being a better mother to Boyd.

Not wanting to get stuck in another argument on something that wasn't even on point for the night, Julian rocked Cedrick's knee with a well-placed foot. Shuttered brown flickered up beneath thick eyelashes, and Julian took that as assent to change the topic.

"I'm pissed off about a few things."

Cedrick looked at Julian more head on, giving Julian tacit permission to continue.

“Finny called me yesterday.”

Cedrick’s eyebrows rose. “Patrick Finley? He’s a sergeant in Sex Assault now, isn’t he?” At Julian’s nod, Cedrick frowned. “What’d he need you for?”

“Serial rapist in the neighborhood targeting vulnerable women. Stranger rapes, all of them. Asked me to keep an eye out, see if I couldn’t help ID the asshole.”

The darkness that overcame Cedrick’s face made Julian feel better about how royally fucking pissed he still was about the topic. Some people these days dismissed that sort of topic like it meant nothing, like it was someone else’s problem and not their own.

But not Cedrick.

Never Cedrick.

He felt the pain of innocents more than anyone Julian had ever met. The man had more compassion in one day than Julian had felt in his entire life, and somehow—*somehow*, it meant Julian never felt alone. The days Julian felt overwhelmed by life, he knew somewhere out there was Cedrick, ready to take on that anger and pain along with him, if he just needed it.

If he only asked.

He felt one shard of weight lift from his chest, moving him from feeling drowned in water to simply suffocated by a blanket.

Baby steps.

“I’ll help,” Cedrick said flatly, and Julian knew he would.

Letting out a low breath, Julian nodded. “Thanks. Maybe your people can let me know if they get any leads. I’ll send you the info later.”

“I’ll get it out to everyone soon as I get it. If you do any stakeouts and need a partner, you know I’m up for that, too.”

“Thanks, man. We’ll see. You need to be home with your family sometimes, too.”

A shade of the sadness from before filtered across Cedrick’s features, and Julian fought the urge to shake his head. Only problem with Cedrick and his compassion was he had a terrible poker face, which was comical considering his wife was nothing *but* poker face. But every emotion of Cedrick’s was a silent movie playing across his face, muted and quiet and greyed out compared to the vibrant colors around them.

“I forgot to mention that case to Bell yesterday,” Julian said casually, and was rewarded with Cedrick being jolted out of his thoughts.

“Why did you see Bell?”

“He came to me.”

Cedrick turned the glass between his fingertips and, after a moment, took a deliberate drink. The fact that he didn’t speak immediately and wouldn’t quite meet Julian’s eyes made his squirrelness even more evident.

“You know why he came.” Julian was intrigued despite himself.

Cedrick shrugged with one shoulder. "Not necessarily."

"Yes, you do. You know he's worried about you."

The front door became very interesting to Cedrick, who stared at it like it held the meaning of life.

Julian punched Cedrick in the shoulder, regaining the journalist's dodgy gaze. "Beau. Don't even try that evasive shit with me. What's the deal? Bell said you'd been acting strange lately. I was planning to psychoanalyze you and tell Bell without bringing it up to you, but you're freaking me out now. You're not normal."

Cedrick let out a dark laugh. "Thanks."

Julian crossed his arms with a scowl. "You know what I mean. Spill."

Cedrick was silent for long enough that Julian couldn't disregard the ambient noise any longer. It was loud on a Saturday night, with so many conversations overlapping beneath the music that it was impossible to pull out any one coherent sentence. From the corner of his eye, he saw the Wilkins' and their boytoy pass by, Janice's hand rested possessively on the man's lower back. She didn't notice Julian, of which he was grateful because he didn't want to have to deal with her turning tomato red and sputtering how it "isn't how it looks." Despite it *always* being "how it looks."

He'd run through that scenario enough times with other past clients that he didn't feel the need to go through it now.

Especially not when Cedrick was about to crack. He was sure of it.

A great sigh released from Cedrick, deflating him. He turned quiet, dark eyes on Julian. He looked more exhausted than Julian had seen in a long time.

"I can't say much," Cedrick warned, and Julian nodded. He didn't want to give Cedrick time to rethink opening up.

Luckily, Cedrick didn't. He drank the rest of his beer and kept his eyes down, somewhere around the apparently-rumpled-despite-smoothing-it-out shirt Julian wore. "There's something I'm working on. It's been bugging me."

"Bugging you how?"

Cedrick scrubbed his face and shook his head. "I can't tell you right now."

"Come on, Ced. You gotta give me a little more than that."

In the pause that ensued, the music changed to something a hell of a lot shittier; a tune Julian didn't recognize, but Cedrick apparently did because he tapped the melody against the side of the mug. But Julian knew Cedrick well enough to realize that this time, Cedrick wasn't pausing to decide if he wanted to speak at all. It was a contemplative quiet, the sort that happened when he was running through the pieces of an article he was stringing together, and determining whether he had enough facts to speak about it.

"I don't have enough verifiable facts yet to know for sure," Cedrick finally said with a frown. Turned out Cedrick wasn't the only one who could read his friend's mind. Point 1 to Cedrick and Julian both. He met Julian's eyes. "All I can say right now is I'm thinking about a future article on possible prison cover-ups."

Julian's eyebrows shot up. Well, well. Color him even *more* intrigued, now.

"Yeah? Like what?"

"Like I can't tell you right now because it's still mostly a hunch," Cedrick said sardonically. He pushed the mug away and sighed. "I'm not trying to put you off, Julian, it's just—"

"Ceddy-baby needs his facts to be concrete before he casts aspersions on anyone else's house, yeah, yeah, I know," Julian flashed a grin. "You think I don't know you well enough by now?"

The smile that Cedrick gave him was much closer to normal. "Guess you do."

"And Bell does too, damn sexy bastard." Julian shoved Cedrick's shoulder. "So call the dude tomorrow or something. He's having kittens over how worried he is about you."

Cedrick rolled his eyes, but the smile grew. "Will do, Mom."

"If I'm your mom, then I expect some motherfucking cookies and chocolates delivered Monday to my desk. Show a lady some love for shoving you out of her vag."

Mischief crinkled the edges of Cedrick's eyes. "Should I send some flowers, while I'm at it?"

"Only if you brush up on your floriography first. Last time you told me you hated me with those orange lilies."

A true laugh erupted from Cedrick; deep, joyful and infectious. In that moment another piece of the heaviness that had been weighing on Julian lifted. Cedrick had become like a brother, and Julian never wanted anything to happen to him. When Ced was acting so morose and sketchy, it started to grate on Julian until he felt it reflected in himself.

How fucking pathetic was that? Getting so unnerved just because his friend wasn't feeling his best.

Julian resisted the urge to sigh. Somewhere along the line he'd become such a wuss.

"I can't believe you know that offhand. There are times when you're an incredible geek."

Julian smirked. "Tsk, tsk, quite the negligent little journalist you are. Just going to trust me on my word that I had the right meaning, there?"

"You know I'm going to verify it when I get home."

This time, it was Julian's turn to laugh. "Yeah. I *do* know that. Offhanded joke or not, you just can't live with yourself if you don't get the answer from at least three sources before you go to bed."

Cedrick flashed a wicked grin. "Not so negligent, then, am I?"

Julian scoffed. "Stop looking for pats on the back and get out of here. I've seen you glancing at your watch all night. You gotta get home to the missus, right?"

"Right." Cedrick pushed himself to a stand. He threw some cash on the table. "Get that to Crane, will you?"

Julian grimaced. "Come on, man. That lazy asshole doesn't need any more of a tip than you already gave him."

Cedrick chuckled. "Sure does with the way you've been talking tonight. If I'm not given the evil eye and thrown out next time I come here, it'll be a miracle."

“Then don’t ever come to this hellhole again.”

Cedrick looked reproachfully at Julian as he shoved his wallet in his back pocket. “It’s a good place for CI’s who don’t want to stand out. You know that.”

“Yeah, yeah...”

Cedrick snorted. “What, you bring your CI’s to the Emperor for a little ten thousand dollar wine and a stay overnight? You can afford that on your salary?”

“Shut up, *Dad*.”

Cedrick’s look was bemused. “I don’t think I understand our relationship anymore. Are we... brothers? Married? Asexually reproducing...?”

“We’re none of those things because you’re too fucking stupid and ugly to be part of my gene pool. Now get the fuck outta here and tell Bell you’re just being a sketchy bastard on purpose and there isn’t some dramatic bullshit going down that he needs to worry about.”

It was Cedrick’s turn to roll his eyes with a, “Yeah, yeah,” before he turned and filtered through the crowd. In a blink, he was gone.

Julian stayed there for half an hour longer, bored but not feeling like going home yet. He was unsuccessful in finding someone interesting to bring back for the night, but he did find a new client.

Baby steps all around.

+ + +

Monday, June 27, 2005

*The Sun office building, Crandall Park
Lexington, PA*

The Sun’s office was crowded at eleven in the morning. The sound of phones ringing, keyboards clacking, and papers shuffling was a comforting undertone to the day. Cedrick half-listened to the murmured conversations of his coworkers, and wished not for the first time that Reisler would learn to temper his voice. The man’s conversations became everyone’s business in the entire floor at his superhuman decibel level. It wouldn’t be so bad, but it was usually so incredibly inane that it left Cedrick twitching for a good song and a set of headphones to replace the ones he’d lost on his last assignment.

With a sigh, Cedrick tipped back in his chair and kicked his feet up onto the desk. He swayed back and forth, rocking on the swivel chair while his gaze automatically roamed the fabric partitions. He’d managed to commandeer the cubicle despite being mostly freelance these days, because it was far off in the corner with no hope of ever seeing one of the windows gracing The Sun’s walls. And it couldn’t keep a light working for the life of it.

The staff called it Suicide Cubicle, because everyone who had previously used the space with its oppressive darkness had... Cedrick was still unclear on the transition. Somehow, in Generic-“They” Logic, it became a cause/effect of bad lighting to the people from this cubicle getting all the worst assignments.

Well, that, and because it was rumored someone had died or been murdered in this corner before The Sun had taken over this building. It was the ghost, his coworkers said, who made this cubicle always feel cold and uninviting. The ghost who always made the fluorescent light overhead flicker endlessly, frantically, calling out for help or maybe revenge.

That last bit was Cedrick's touch. He liked getting poetic about mundane things. It made life interesting.

Cedrick rather liked the cubicle, truth be told. It did have a creepy vibe about it, but he liked it for that reason. It was good inspiration for Red Sunset. He had the mystery novel mostly plotted out, with just a few last minute touches to be made on the final chapter, and had all but settled on the pseudonym of Andre Bute. He hadn't had time to write much of the actual book itself, but a possibly-haunted cubicle was certainly mood-inducing for a novel about a woman who stalks and kills the son she learns her husband had with a mistress.

One particularly hearty rock had him nearly twisting his feet off the desk, and he caught himself with a hand braced on the cubicle wall. Paper crinkled beneath his fingertips.

His attention was fondly and happily drawn to the wall, covered in Boyd's drawings. He could track Boyd's age by following the rows of art; they grew more detailed and realistic as time passed, and as Boyd became more used to using colors.

The one he'd touched was of a dog lying in the grass, and it brought the memory vividly back to Cedrick with mixed emotions.

This was one of the first pieces of Boyd's art that Cedrick had saved from that time period.

The dog in question lived down the block, the front yard just barely in view of their large window in the living room. The dog was a fluffy white monstrosity that often flopped down in the front yard and stared dolefully at all who passed.

Cedrick hadn't known why Boyd had fixated on the dog for a week any time he'd seen the kid, until one day the drawing had been placed neatly in the recycle bin. Cedrick had taken it out and had searched the house until he'd found his son sitting quietly on the floor of his bedroom, in his seemingly favorite place between the far wall and his bed.

When Cedrick had asked Boyd why he'd put it in the recycling, Boyd had looked up at him with luminous eyes and had said simply:

"We don't throw paper away. It has to be recycled."

"You're right," Cedrick had said, holding the drawing so Boyd could see it. "But why did you throw it out in the first place? It's very good, Boyd."

Boyd had tilted his head, studying Cedrick intently. "Because it was over."

"Over?"

"I drew the dog and then I was done. It would clutter the house if I kept it. We must throw out anything that's done. Or else it's in the way and that's bad."

Cedrick had felt his heart pull at the way his four-year-old son had spoken so calmly. In those words he'd heard his wife. He'd known Boyd drew a lot, and he had wondered where the art had gone. But he'd always assumed his son had kept them in a notebook or folder somewhere, or had given them away to others the way he occasionally gave Cedrick art with family as the theme.

Cedrick had clutched the dog drawing tightly, and had approached his son in large strides. He'd crouched down in front of him, resting his hands on those small shoulders, and had waited as that cherubic face had turned up to him.

He was such a sweet child, Cedrick had thought with something akin to panic—such a sweet child, who kept hiding it behind the walls he'd already built in his heart. He had been only four years old at the time, and even then Cedrick had seen the quiescence in his features, and the way he so often settled into a still statue when he wasn't engaged.

That day, Cedrick hadn't been able to help himself; he'd pulled Boyd forward into a hug, ignoring his child's startled grunt and burying his face in his soft blond hair. He'd held him close, wishing he could protect him from the world, from Cedrick, from himself, from Vivienne, from everything, just by having a strong enough grip. Just by feeling love so powerful that it choked his breath and silenced his voice.

He'd felt small hands settle on his back. He'd felt his son's small body move in steady breaths, and he'd heard the quiet uncertainty when Boyd had spoken.

"Dad?"

"Yes, son?"

"Are you okay?"

He'd wanted to cry, then. Because he was fine, but it was his son who needed help. He'd wanted to do so many things, but he hadn't known how to fix it all. He hadn't known, in that moment, why he'd ever thought he and Vivienne had been responsible enough to raise a child when they'd both been teenagers in an unfamiliar country. Not when they'd both had so many grandiose plans, and had still been trying to figure out themselves and their marriage.

But then again, he'd thought he'd have his mother and father to help. He'd thought he and Vivienne wouldn't be *completely* alone. And he *had* always wanted a kid. A full family. He'd been so excited to start early, to fulfill his dream of experiencing all those little moments of raising a child and living with the love of his life.

He hadn't known the war was coming, hadn't known his family would be gone in an instant the same week his son was born. He hadn't known how overwhelmed he would feel a month into Boyd's life, watching his wife withdraw more and more while his son sobbed for attention at night. He'd tried to be there for Boyd, who hadn't asked for this life, without losing Vivienne, who had risked everything for Cedrick and never asked for anything but love in return.

Even now, he didn't know the best thing to do other than to love his family with everything he had. To remind them every chance he got, with all his heart and soul, that they were everything to him.

Even now, he didn't know how to help them in the long run other than to try to make the world a better place. To charge ahead and make the world as safe as he could for his son so he could grow up happily and protected. To remove that terror he knew lurked in Vivienne's heart, that the war would come again and take the love she had left. To protect them both from everything they couldn't control, while loving them endlessly within everything they could.

He wanted to remove the opportunity for another war to take family from any of them. He wanted to love Boyd with all his soul for all of Boyd's life, so Boyd would never have to deal with that

fear of realizing his family was suddenly gone. He wanted to love Vivienne for eternity, so she could believe more and more that she was worth loving, that she was human and beautiful even with all her flaws.

He wanted all those things but he didn't know if he was making the right choices.

Sometimes, he was terrified that he was doing everything wrong.

Truthfully, he had no idea how to be a good father, how to be a good husband. Especially in his situation where sometimes it felt like his wife and his son were at odds with each other, and if he showed more love to one of them, then the other felt like he didn't love them as much.

But that wasn't true. He loved them both so much it was almost a physical pain, loved them more than life and the Earth and all the stars, and yet—

And yet, in moments like that when Boyd dismissed his talent so easily, Cedrick felt like a failure. Like he had to try harder, be better, love more thoroughly, remove more danger from the world, do everything more and more, to clear away the clouds from their eyes.

So he'd clutched his son like he was a lifeline. And all he'd been able to say was, "Give me your pictures from now on, okay, Boyd? If you finish something, don't recycle it. I'll keep it."

"Why?"

"Because they're good, Boyd. You shouldn't throw away your talent."

"But it's pointless. Once it's done it's like it was never there. Why do you want to keep garbage, daddy?"

Cedrick had gripped his son as tightly as he'd dared. He'd wanted to ask if Boyd really believed that—if he thought that there was no point in experience, in life, because eventually it would all be gone. It was such a fatalistic view of life, particularly for someone so small, that it had briefly struck Cedrick breathless.

"Because I want to remember you when I'm not home."

"Oh." Boyd's voice had been so quiet, so confused but also—Cedrick had been sure of it—quietly pleased. It had to have been the case, because Boyd's little hands had clutched Cedrick's shirt and he had pressed his cheek into Cedrick's chest.

"Do you have any drawings, dad?"

"No, son. I'm not a good enough artist like you. Why?"

"Because I want to remember you when you're gone, too."

It was said so quietly, so muffled, that Cedrick almost hadn't heard the words. When he realized what had been said, he'd clenched onto Boyd, and had dropped all plans he'd had for the rest of the day. He'd resolved not to leave his son alone until he'd fallen asleep that night.

"I'll never be gone, Boyd. I'll always be here for you. I'll always love you. You know that, right?"

When Boyd had pulled back in his father's arms just enough to look up, Cedrick had seen the fluctuation of doubt and hope playing unusually clearly on his delicate features. Finally, Boyd had nodded and leaned forward to settle against Cedrick's chest. His little arms had wound around Cedrick's neck and had held him close.

“Okay,” Boyd had said, as if it were as simple as that.

Just ‘okay.’

Cedrick wanted to make the world as easy as that.

He had to remove the chance for tragedy to hurt this child he loved with all his life. He had to protect him, not just physically but also every other way.

Right down to the dog drawing that had crinkled in his hand.

“Earth to Cedrick.”

Cedrick jumped, halfway throwing himself off the chair. He caught himself before he crashed to the floor, locked in an awkward position.

Shana laughed at him. “That could have made a good story, right there. Hold that pose a sec, would ya? I’ll go get my camera.”

Cedrick scowled at her, although there was no heat to it. He righted himself with supreme dignity. “What do you want?”

The dignity was misplaced, because she only laughed and ruffled his hair. He sighed. He’d never managed the art of graceful recovery, like Vivienne could do without thought. Nor had he learned her haughty gaze of someone raised in riches the likes of which generations of his family couldn’t match even with all their life savings combined.

All he’d learned was to be sincere and never let life get him down.

He could fix it all, he knew, if he only tried hard enough. If he only continued to work toward that goal every moment of his life, if he only continued to smile for his family even when he was exhausted, if he only did the best job around.

He could do it all. He just had to believe in himself, in his dream, in his family and friends. He would pave the way for them, make it safe for them to follow, and together they could stride into a future that protected everyone equally from senseless tragedy. It was doable, because humans were inherently good; he just had to believe in everyone around him.

“I was going to see if you wanted lunch, but then you were sitting there staring at the wall like it had the answer to life itself, with this dopey sad look on your face. What’s up? Something happen to the kidlet?”

Cedrick barely resisted the urge to sigh again, heavier this time. Instead, he straightened and dropped his feet firmly to the floor. “He’s fine. I was just remembering something.”

He looked distractedly at the clock. Jeez. No wonder she’d looked at him oddly; he’d been staring at the wall for seven minutes.

“Where are you thinking today?”

She shrugged. “I dunno. Mexican?”

“The only good restaurant nearby is Pimiento’s, and we’ve been there five times this month already.”

“Asian?”

“What about Caribbean?”

Shana eyed him dubiously. “Depends... Are we talking the one on the edge of Barrows, or the one in Lincoln Square?”

Cedrick hesitated. “Well. The one in Barrows is better, but if you don’t feel comfortable—”

“No, I do,” she said hurriedly. “Feel comfortable. Very comfortable. The one in Lincoln is god-awful. I was hoping you’d say Barrows.”

Cedrick flashed a smile. “Good, then.”

Shana checked the time on her phone. “Want to head out in five? I’ll see if I can round up a few more in the meantime.”

“I’ll meet you there. I have to do something first.”

Shana nodded easily. “See you there, then,” she called as she loped away.

Cedrick grabbed his work bag and threw the strap over his shoulder before heading out. He strode down the stairs rather than taking the elevator, and ten minutes later emerged in a day that was almost obnoxiously cheerful. The clouds backlit by the sun were such a bright white that they threatened to burn his retinas. He squinted at the sky, then shaded his eyes as he wound his way through the people on the street until he was able to break off.

There was a small park nearby, little more than a half-dead triangle of grass with a few bushes planted on one side, and it had served his needs well for years. No one ventured down the block, nestled as it was between a massive apartment building and a row of empty storefronts. He had been paranoid about someone from the apartments looking down the first few times he’d visited the park, until he’d realized that the building was almost entirely vacant, and the few people who did live there didn’t seem to care what was happening outside the egoistic sphere of their lives.

When he was seated on the park bench and had verified no one was around, let alone within hearing distance, he pulled out his phone. He hesitated, his thumb hovering over the gallery icon, but he forced himself not to look and instead pulled up ‘John Ramos.’ It was the cover name he used in his contact list for Bell’s more secure phone. He called the number, and hardly had to wait two rings before Bell’s warm, deep voice filtered through his ear.

“I wondered when you’d call.”

“I was shamed by Julian. Did you really have to bring him into it?”

Cedrick could almost see Bell’s rolling shrug. “I figured he’d know, if no one else did. Sometimes you talk to him when you’re quiet around us.”

“It isn’t anything to worry about.”

“Then why have you been so skittish?”

“I’m looking into something.”

“Something you can’t even tell me?”

Cedrick wondered if he detected a hint of hurt in Bell’s voice.

“I don’t have enough information yet. I’ll let you know when I do.”

“Hmm.” He heard rustling, and the distant sound of the hospital intercom. “Fair enough. Is there anything else you can say, meantime?”

Cedrick ran through what he knew so far, which was still not enough. Not nearly enough to tell anyone why exactly this was bothering him so much. "All I can say is it has to do with a prison. Maybe prisons. I don't know yet."

There was a lull of silence, and then Bell sighed. "Just stay safe, Cedrick. Sometimes you put blinders on and don't see how far you're careening ahead."

Cedrick chuckled. "Just because I mentioned prisons doesn't mean I'm going to end up in one over this, if that's what you're worried about."

"I'm not worried about anything in specific. I'm only worried that you seem worried."

Cedrick sighed and tipped his head back against the bench. "I'm not worried. I'm bemused. Get your adjectives straight."

That drew a rumbling chuckle out of Bell, thankfully, because Cedrick wasn't very much in the mood to have his other good friend try to grill him for more information while trying to cheer him up. He wasn't even that frustrated by this case yet. It was simultaneously comforting and annoying that his friends were so keyed into his behavior that they recognized even that small of a shift.

"I have to go. Duty calls."

"Same for me. Take care, Cedrick."

"You too. I'll see you next month at the meeting, if not sooner."

"Right."

Bell hung up and Cedrick was left alone with his thoughts once more. He held the phone in his lap, and felt the inexorable draw of his gaze from the periwinkle sky down, down to the gallery icon burning a hole in his mind.

He hesitated. It would do him no good to obsess over the photo further today. But he couldn't get it out of his head. Couldn't stop wondering what exactly was happening.

It was without permission from his brain that his thumb pressed the icon, and he went through the motions of accessing the locked folder hidden in the files. He flipped through the surveillance photos he'd taken for one of his articles, and landed on what had become the bane of his existence for the past month.

Such a simple picture, at first glance. The woman in the foreground was Emelia Crestler, aide to a powerful politician and embroiled in what Cedrick was fairly certain was going to become a scandal that would cost her everything. He'd been checking up on her, seeing if she was involved in the black market group she allegedly had ties to, and it had brought him out near Baltimore. The man she spoke to in the picture was technically legitimate, but Cedrick had had his doubts about the true source of the man's money for years. Cedrick still had plans to follow the money on that man someday.

It wasn't until Cedrick had returned to his hotel room and had been reviewing the pictures on the larger screen of his computer that he'd seen in the background what now Cedrick couldn't help seeing to the exclusion of all else.

In the far back two men stood in the shadows of a tree, one leaning against the trunk while the other stood in front of him. They looked deep in conversation, and they had their bodies tilted away from the main thoroughfare nearby.

It would have meant nothing, if Cedrick hadn't recognized one man's profile. Cedrick blew the photo up until the screen was consumed with the angular lines of the man's nose and sharp chin. The shadows didn't hide how healthy he looked; far more than he'd been the last time Cedrick had seen a photo of him four years ago. Back when his face had peered out of the black and white photo of a news column.

"Neal," Cedrick muttered under his breath. "What the hell are you doing alive?"

Five

Tuesday June 28, 2005

Cedar Hills neighborhood

Lexington, PA

“Gooooood morning, sunshine!”

Boyd shot up in bed, his blond hair a mass of tangles and fluff. His golden eyes were wide, turning to the door even as his little Batman pajama shirt fell partially off his shoulder. Cedrick grinned and took great hopping strides into the room, all the way to the bed.

“How’s my favorite son today? Did you sleep well?”

Boyd rubbed at his eyes and frowned. “What are you doing, daddy?”

Cedrick threw himself onto the bed, looping his arms around Boyd and dragging him down with him. He hugged him close, rolling back and forth while Boyd let out a startled huff.

“Guess what I did already today, Boyd? Can you guess?”

“No.”

“You didn’t even try!”

Boyd giggled as Cedrick shifted to ruffling his hair. “I don’t know!”

“Well, if you aren’t even going to guess I’ll just tell you. I called in sick for you *and* me.”

Boyd twisted around to look at Cedrick, amber eyes large and confused. “Why? I’m not sick. Are you?”

Cedrick had already run through his mind how he would handle this today, so he smiled and said, “No, but you do well in school and that should be rewarded. I’m instating a new system, where if you do super well, we’ll get to play hooky sometimes and go around together doing all the fun things we want. Besides,” he added, “this is just the summer academy right now. They won’t mind if you take one day off.”

Boyd frowned but it was more thoughtful than anything. “Then what are we doing today?”

“You’ll see!” Cedrick sat up and pulled Boyd along with him, absently smoothing down his hair. “Okay, get ready, buddy. I can help you with your hair. Do you want help with your clothes?”

“No.” Boyd scrunched up his face.

He had liked choosing his own clothes for a while now, preferring not to be treated like a little kid. Cedrick thought it was adorable, but didn’t say anything because Boyd Would Not Appreciate That.

“Alright, meet me in the kitchen when you’re ready. I’ll get breakfast going. You have any preferences today?”

“No.”

Cedrick rolled off the bed and stood up, grinning wickedly. “Okayyyy, Belgian waffles covered in candy and whipped cream and powdered sugar, it is!”

Boyd scrambled to get off the bed. “No, daddy!” he called out, aghast, as if Cedrick had said he was off to kill a puppy. “I don’t want that!”

Cedrick laughed evilly as he left the room. When he heard the pad of little feet behind him he called over his shoulder, “Nope, you can’t come out until you get dressed! I’ll go make our super sweet, mega special waffles! Extra chocolate and ice cream on top!”

The feet slowed to a stop, then Boyd huffed so loudly Cedrick could hear it down the hall.

“No, I want oatmeal!” Boyd yelled, his voice getting more muffled as he ran back into his room. “I want plain oatmeal!”

Cedrick laughed under his breath and headed to the cupboards.

“Daddy, I want—!” There was a crash, and Cedrick froze, looking over his shoulder, listening intently for sounds of wailing or pain.

“You okay?” he called.

“I want *oatmeal!*” Boyd yelled indignantly.

“Okay but what happened?”

“I tripped on my pants.”

“Wow,” Cedrick said to himself with a laugh. Boyd was rarely clumsy. “The kid must really want some oatmeal today.”

He turned and walked fully back into the kitchen. “Okay, okay,” he yelled. “Be careful and take your time, okay? I’ll get the oatmeal ready for you.”

Boyd didn’t answer but Cedrick could hear him opening and closing drawers. Cedrick continued to listen with half his attention, just to make sure his kid was okay, while he went about making boring old oatmeal for his no-sense-of-taste son, and the sweetest cereal they owned for himself. He then resumed preparing the food and coffee he had started making earlier.

Vivienne walked into the kitchen just as he finished everything. She was almost completely ready for work, in her business casual blouse and skirt, her makeup perfectly done and with half her hair swept back off her face, but she hadn’t yet put on her shoes or grabbed her purse.

She swept her gaze across the table set for two, then accepted the plate he handed her with a tartine on it, and a mug of café au lait. She settled on the edge of one of their chairs, and set the plate on the table.

Taking a bite of the tartine, her eyes slid closed in happiness. This early in the morning, Vivienne liked to take a moment to relax before she left for work. Cedrick knew this after years of living with her, and smiled fondly at the look on her face.

She sipped the café au lait, a slight pinching of her features marking her only indication of distaste.

“We need to get you an espresso machine.” He leaned over, pushed a stray strand of hair behind her ear, and kissed her on the temple. “You and Boyd are both so ridiculously sensitive to

sweet things.”

Her lips curved slightly, her eyelashes lowered. “You say that as if it is a bad thing.”

“It is. It’s terrible.”

“It is not.”

He watched the way her smile grew, a quiet and simple thing that always felt caught between them in a moment in time. He let out a soft laugh, his palm lingering warmly on the side of her neck. “You’re proud he got your taste buds, aren’t you?”

“Hmm.” Her lips quirked higher, a bit of mischief kept within her cool exterior. She looked up at him through her eyelashes, the mug caught between her palms and eyes so blue he felt like he was falling into the sky. She flicked her gaze across the oatmeal, the sugary-sweet cereal sitting in a bowl in front of Cedrick, and back up to him. “What is this?”

“Ah. I have plans for Boyd today.”

“You plan to stay home?”

“Yeah.” He looked over his shoulder, saw Boyd still hadn’t appeared, and leaned closer to her. He dropped his voice to a low rumble. “Remember what we talked about last night?”

“The academy.”

“Yeah. You’re still okay with it?”

That slight pinch of her features, there and gone in seconds. She leaned back, gaze on the butter with a touch of honey spread across the baguette.

“Whatever you feel is best.” She took a bite of the tartine.

“You said the same thing last night.”

“So I did.”

“And you seem annoyed right now.”

“I am not.”

“Viv,” Cedrick said heavily, his eyebrows raising. “Don’t try that with me. I know your moods.”

She sighed. “It would be more of an annoyance to shift our plans, but on this topic, I will do what you feel is best.” She shot him a challenging look. “You know I will.”

“Yeah, I do.” He reached out, pushing baby hairs back from her face again.

Before he could decide on what to say next, Vivienne stiffened and looked past his shoulder. He turned and saw Boyd hovering in the doorway, one hand on the door jamb. His hair was a complete mess, but at least he had dressed himself. He had chosen a pair of dark blue pants, a red t-shirt with a plaid pocket, and his favorite little black fitted peacoat.

At the sight of him, Vivienne huffed out a sigh and set down her food. She stood and walked out of the room, expertly swaying around Boyd so they did not touch.

Boyd watched her go in silence and then turned to Cedrick, who smiled widely at him and waved him over.

“Come on, punk. Let me see what we’ve got here.”

Boyd smiled and walked over. When he was within reach, Cedrick dragged him closer and turned him all around exaggeratedly. “Well now! What have we here? Boyd Beaulieu is walking down the runway with a pair of designer pants, expertly made of water from the depths of the Mariana Trench. Only the finest for this young son of a former millionaire! This shirt is made from the ripest berries of the rare Unicorn Fruit—”

Boyd snickered and tried to wiggle out of his dad’s grasp. “No, it’s not!”

“—and the plaid pocket is made from compressing the rivers of the world where they crisscross over one another. It was taken directly from a space station roaming beyond our atmosphere.”

Boyd laughed when Cedrick reached under his coat and started crinkling his clothes. “No it isn’t, daddy!”

“And this coat! It’s worth a thousand million dollars, forged from the shadows at the base of Mount Olympus—”

“You’re wrong! You’re wrong! It’s just clothes!” Boyd was snickering as he said it, and Cedrick grinned as he cuddled and ruffled his son.

“Like I said—only the highest quality for Boyd Beaulieu, superstar of the day, most beloved son of the world—”

“Stop it,” Boyd laughed.

Boyd and Cedrick both noticed at the same time that Vivienne had re-entered the room. Boyd paused, his laughter dying down, while Cedrick smiled up at her.

“Oh and look who we have here! Former millionaire Vivienne Beaulieu herself, heiress extraordinaire visiting us all the way from France. Tell us, Vivienne, what do you think of the unicorn, water, and shadow ensemble your son has created for himself today?”

She looked down at Boyd and then up at Cedrick. “He will be too hot.”

Cedrick released Boyd and leaned back with a roll of his eyes. He’d thought the same thing but would it kill her to play along now and then? He hadn’t planned to actually let the kid walk into late June weather wearing full Fall clothing.

He noticed she held something in her hands, and watched as she came closer. She knelt in front of Boyd and gestured imperiously for him to disrobe. Boyd’s lips set but he still took off the coat and pants. She handed him a pair of black shorts, and took the coat and pants from him. When he finished pulling on the shorts, she frowned at his feet.

“Where are your socks?”

Boyd frowned down at his feet too.

They both had such consternated looks, staring down at bare little kid feet, that Cedrick couldn’t help snickering. They turned twin indignant looks up at him, which made him laugh.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” he said, waving a hand. “He can wear sandals.”

They both looked so affronted that he laughed more loudly.

Vivienne shot him a look and then turned to Boyd. "I will get them."

"Okay."

While she was gone, Cedrick hooked his hands under Boyd's arms and swung him up onto a chair. "Here you are, young master. Your gross and boring oatmeal, as ordered."

Boyd looked positively delighted at that and Cedrick sighed. Boyd and Cedrick started eating, and when Vivienne returned she set down a pair of Boyd's socks, as well as red and black shoes that matched his outfit. She glanced at the clock, then leaned over to quickly eat the rest of her tartine and drink half the cafe au lait.

They were quiet as they all ate, until Vivienne set her dishes in the sink and turned to leave. Cedrick stood in time to come up to her and hold out his arms. She ticked up an eyebrow but it wasn't in displeasure. They hugged and he kissed her on her cheek, careful not to mess up her makeup.

"I'll see you later, hon. Have a good day at work."

Vivienne nodded, let her hand linger briefly on his temple half into his hair, and then pulled away. She flicked a glance at Boyd, who remained hunched over his oatmeal eating, then back at Cedrick.

"Enjoy yourselves."

"You bet we will," he said with a smile.

She left to grab her purse and shoes. Soon after he heard the click of her passing across the floor, then the front door closing.

Cedrick returned to his cereal and toast, and eyed Boyd.

"Where are we going today?" Boyd asked.

"Nowhere, until we get that rat's nest of your hair under control. What were you doing, fighting tangle demons in your sleep?"

Boyd scrunched up his face and stuck his tongue out. Cedrick stuck his tongue out in return. Boyd laughed and Cedrick reached over, messing his hair up further. Boyd fended him off.

They got into a short, playful tussle between Cedrick's hands and Boyd's, before Cedrick almost knocked his mug over and Boyd almost dropped his elbow in his oatmeal.

"Uh oh." Cedrick threw his hands up, backing away. "Truce! I call truce! You done with your food?"

Boyd nodded.

"Okay. Go grab your brush for me and I'll get cleaned up here."

"I can brush my own—"

"I don't care what you can do, buddy! Today I'm pampering you. I'll be done by the time you get back."

Boyd gave Cedrick an odd look but nonetheless got off the chair and trotted out the kitchen toward the hallway. True to his word, Cedrick was lightning fast and quite proud of his prowess, getting everything in the right area and put away in the short time it took Boyd to dig through the drawers and find his brush. When he came back, he held the brush out and Cedrick motioned for Boyd

to sit down. He stood behind his son, carefully holding his hair and slowly working on the knots.

Boyd's hair was mostly straight with a light wave that showed up when it was damp or too short. Cedrick loved the shade of blond; depending on the lighting, it reminded him of the rich gold of a sunset or the pale buttery hue on the outreach of a sunrise. It wasn't quite the same shade as Vivienne's, but it was another part of Boyd that came from the Moreau side instead of the Beaulieu side, and so Cedrick loved it all the more.

At the moment, Boyd's hair was past his shoulders. As Cedrick methodically worked his way through the tangles, he studied the top of his son's head. Should he try bringing anything up now, or wait until they were in the middle of having fun when Boyd may be more relaxed? Which way was best?

He stayed quiet at first, and then decided it could seem casual enough when done right now. If he tried commenting later, Boyd may notice and wonder.

"Your hair is getting long." Cedrick ran his fingers through a cleared section to make sure there weren't hidden tangles.

Boyd started to nod, remembered not to, and said, "Yeah."

Cedrick pinched his lips, wondering the best way to say this without making Boyd think he was saying something he wasn't.

"Seems like short hair's all the rage among the boys lately. Like Lou's."

"Yeah."

"Do you like it long?"

Boyd tried to look over his shoulder but had to stop when he pulled at his hair. Cedrick could see his furrowed eyebrows. "Do I have to cut it?"

Damn. Backfired.

"No, buddy," Cedrick assured him. "You don't have to do anything. I just wondered if you like it."

Boyd frowned, his little shoulders setting.

"Why?" Cedrick asked. "Did someone say something to you?"

Boyd turned away from Cedrick. He didn't answer.

Cedrick fought to keep his hands moving calmly, casually. Not tighten with anger on his son's behalf. "You know, when I was your age some of the kids weren't very nice to some of the other kids. Sometimes they said things."

No answer.

"They didn't understand people who were different. They even said things to me."

Boyd tilted his head as much as he could, straining his eyes to see his dad. "To you?"

"Yep."

"Why?"

Cedrick let out a rueful half-laugh at that. "Well... A lot of reasons, really. I was really hyper,

talked a lot. And my mom wasn't from around there."

"Around where?"

"Quebec. You know how I grew up in Canada? My mom was American. She had a funny accent compared to there, because of where she grew up. People weren't terrible about it, most people didn't care. But there was this one kid in my class, he was mean to everyone. He teased me about her, and how I looked, and the things I wore, because we didn't have a lot of money. People got annoyed because I asked so many questions, didn't stop talking. And my older brother was not very nice either, so sometimes people got mad at me because of him. Things like that."

Boyd was quiet. "What did you do?"

"I told my mom and dad. And you know what they told me?"

Boyd shook his head.

Cedrick finished the last of the tangles and set the brush down. He moved around in front of the chair and knelt, placing his hands on Boyd's shoulders while looking him straight in the eyes.

"They told me that they loved me. They said that everyone in this world is special for different reasons, and that more than anything else it's important that we always be ourselves. Even if we feel different than others, if that is who we are then that's a wonderful thing to be. They said this world would be really boring if we were all the same, so anyone wanting me to change and be like them wasn't thinking anything through. And they said that if someone is really mean to me, they're probably projecting something about themselves onto me. It's probably not about me at all. It's probably them being mad or sad about something in their own life. They said it wasn't my fault."

Boyd searched Cedrick's eyes and then dropped his gaze to his hands, where they tangled lightly with one another. When he didn't speak, Cedrick reached up and ran a hand warmly down the side of Boyd's head, over his smooth hair. He softened his voice.

"Do the other kids sometimes say things to you too, Boyd? Maybe about how you look or something else?"

"I don't know," Boyd mumbled, his hands clenching.

Cedrick withheld the mixture of anger and sadness he felt. He was fairly certain the kids were saying something, but the principal was completely unhelpful when he tried talking to her. He'd tried asking Lou, but Lou wouldn't say anything without Boyd's permission. Still, judging by Lou's expression at the question, the answer was a yes. All Lou would tell Cedrick was that Boyd looked different than the other boys and that Lou thought he looked fine. The 'but...' was left unspoken in the air between them, and that was the best Cedrick got.

It was completely ridiculous he had to go to a kid to get the information in the first place. But he couldn't dwell on that now; he would get too angry with the school and Boyd might misread everything, thinking the frustration was aimed at him.

"The thing is, Boyd, you *do* look different. Your hair is longer than theirs, your eyes are a different color than anyone else's—"

He thought Boyd mumbled something about a girl but he couldn't hear properly and when he paused, Boyd was quiet. So he pressed on, squeezing his son's shoulders.

"But being different is a good thing. Being yourself is the very best person you can be. When I

see your hair and your eyes and all of that, do you know what I think?"

Boyd shook his head.

"I think to myself, 'That's my beautiful son. That's my Boyd.' And I'm proud of those differences of yours."

Boyd still wouldn't look up, but a little of the tension in his shoulders loosened.

"And you know what else I think?"

Boyd shook his head again.

"I think about how I love you more than the moon and the stars and all the planets in all the universe. I think about how important you are to me. And I think about all the things my parents said to me when I was your age, and right now I'm saying them to you. If someone is mean, they're mean because of something about themselves, not you. If they want you to change, they're wrong. This world needs *you*, Boyd, not someone else. Just you, happy with who you are, confident in being yourself."

At that, Boyd finally risked looking up through his eyelashes. His expression was so uncertain that Cedrick couldn't resist leaning forward and kissing him on the forehead.

"Okay?" Cedrick asked softly.

Boyd worried at his lip and, hesitantly, nodded.

"Okay." Cedrick smiled, but even he could tell it was subdued. He smoothed Boyd's hair back off his face. "I know your hair is longer than the other boys'. We can do anything you want, Boyd, but I don't want you to choose something because someone else makes you. So I'm going to ask you again: do you like your long hair?"

Boyd nodded mutely.

Cedrick's smile was a bit more genuine this time. "Okay, good. I like it too. We're going to keep it."

He hesitated, and then asked the biggest question he had:

"Do you want to stay in summer academy, Boyd?"

Boyd watched Cedrick with wide eyes. "What do you mean?"

Cedrick rubbed at the back of his neck. "Well, if... If you don't want to be around the other kids as often, we can take you out of summer academy. We can find a babysitter or someone to watch you during the day instead. Then you don't have to see the other kids until next school year."

Boyd worried at the hem of his shirt, his lower lip slipping in and out between his teeth. He looked down at his hands.

Silence.

"It's okay if you don't want to be there, Boyd."

Boyd mumbled something but Cedrick couldn't hear it well enough.

"What?"

"I like school," Boyd said quietly.

“Oh.” Cedrick considered his son. “So, you... want to stay in summer academy?”

Boyd twisted the hem around his fingers, in and out in an interweaving pattern. “I like learning.”

Cedrick didn’t feel entirely convinced, but he could tell he wasn’t going to get further with his son today. And he didn’t want to push it too far. Today was supposed to be fun and refreshing, not upsetting.

“Okay. You just let me know if you change your mind, okay?” He kissed Boyd on the top of the head and stood. “You ready to go?”

Boyd fiddled with the end of his shirt. “Yeah, I think so.”

“Then let’s go. We’ve got a long day ahead of us.”

This time when Boyd was quiet, Cedrick hoped it was him digesting what he’d said, integrating some confidence where there may have been concern. He was going to have to have this conversation many times, he thought, even if Boyd ever decided to cut his hair short. His features were too androgynous, his eyes too unique, his personality too reserved, to ever be someone who fit in with the crowd.

The truth was, Boyd was always going to be different. Cedrick only hoped he could impress upon Boyd just how important that difference was to accept and love.

+ + +

Grover Books
Lincoln Square neighborhood
Lexington, PA

“I’m making a dragon guarding a castle and it’s gonna be really cool, just you wait,” Cedrick announced to Boyd. He said it louder than he intended, and got some looks from the kids surrounding them.

Cedrick didn’t care. He stood out, anyway. He was the only dad at the kid’s art event hosted by Grover Books, and one of only three parents actually making art. The other parents helicoptered around the area, keeping an eye on their kid but conversing with an adult. Two moms sat way on the other side of the table also making art, but they were paying more attention to their kids’ art and their conversation than they were their own work. Hunched over the kid-sized table as the only adult taking this kid art time seriously, Cedrick felt like a giant, which was what got him thinking about a fantasy theme.

Boyd looked at him sidelong through a fall of blond hair, glanced down at the shaky and overly strong line Cedrick had already drawn across most of the page, and then simply nodded. Meanwhile, Boyd had already sketched out a rough outline of what he was going to do. Cedrick could already see that it was a drawing of one of the kids nearby, a little boy with a nest of wildly curly hair. Cedrick didn’t know why Boyd chose that boy as his inspiration. Maybe because the boy was really intent on

drawing and wasn't moving around much in comparison to the others.

A local artist had volunteered her time and was currently deep in discussion with the mothers at the table, so at least none of the adults had heard him speak. Cedrick focused all his attention on drawing the castle and the dragon, taking as much care as he could with the crayons they'd been given. He kept messing up and tried to fix it with thicker lines or colors layered on top of one another. And then more lines. And then darker colors. And then even more lines...

It felt like it took twelve hours to finish, but finally he placed the last line on the dragon's wings. He sat up straight, cracking his back and surveying his masterpiece.

He held it as far from his face as he could, and then brought it closer, and then moved it back again. He frowned and tilted his head.

At what point had he put green on the sun? He didn't remember doing that.

He slid his drawing over to Boyd. "Look what I did!"

Boyd was midway through finalizing a curl with a dark brown crayon. He glanced over and froze.

"Oh," Boyd said uncertainly.

"What?" Cedrick looked down at his drawing. "What's wrong?"

Boyd peered at the paper, then pointed to the green bit on the right. "The dragon?"

"Yeah! Looks real life-like, doesn't it?"

Boyd's lips pinched. He stared at the drawing for a long moment. "Do you... want help?"

"Help?" Cedrick echoed blankly.

Boyd pushed his own nearly-finished drawing of the kid over in front of Cedrick, and pulled Cedrick's drawing in front of him. He searched through the crayons scattered in front of them.

"Maybe if you use the gold," he muttered under his breath.

Bemused, Cedrick watched his son and then turned his attention to Boyd's drawing in front of him. Despite being drawn with the same supplies, and by a kid twenty years Cedrick's junior, it was way better. Boyd had even mixed a few colors together to get a good approximation of the kid's skin tone and the highlights of his hair color. He hadn't quite finished filling in the black cowlicks on the side of his face, but he was otherwise basically done.

It wasn't perfect, but it was way better than Cedrick would ever be able to do; especially with blunt, communal crayons as the material.

Cedrick noticed movement behind him and saw the art volunteer had made her way around the table to Boyd's side. She smiled down, her hands braced on her thighs.

"Hi sweetie, and how old are you?"

Boyd didn't spare her a glance, just held up five fingers. He was too busy trying to find the right shade of yellow, apparently.

"Well, you're really good for your age! What a nice... house and tree you drew there."

Boyd froze and looked up at Cedrick.

Cedrick stared aghast at the woman.

"I can see how much effort you put into making those leaves," the woman continued warmly.

Cedrick looked down at his drawing. What leaves? There were no leaves! There was only a dragon!

Boyd made a choking noise in his throat, his lips pressing down. Cedrick knew that look well enough to recognize that his son was trying his damndest not to laugh.

"Hey!" Cedrick said indignantly. He tried to snatch the dragon drawing from his kid.

The woman looked up at Cedrick, misinterpreting his indignation. She placed her hand on the drawing to keep him from taking it. "This is really very good for a five year old. You can see he's starting to experiment with color and... lines." She glanced down at Boyd's drawing in front of Cedrick and her eyebrows shot up. "Wow! And look at you! That's a wonderful piece of art. That's the best thing I've seen a parent draw this month."

Boyd made that damn noise again and covered his mouth with his hand. He was suddenly very intent on reading the names of the colors printed on the crayons.

Cedrick shot a look at Boyd.

"See the way he tried to layer greens for the leaves?" The woman pointed to the dragon wings—*dragon wings!* Not leaves! *Wings!!* "It's the beginning steps on the way toward how you blended everything together in yours. Once he learns to pay attention to the pressure he uses, he will go a long way. By the time your son is your age, I fully believe he will reach your same level. You should be proud."

Cedrick couldn't decide on what sort of expression to make at this point, so his face just ended up scrunched.

"Yeah," he said unenthusiastically. "Real proud."

The woman watched him a moment, clearly unsure what to make of him, and then looked down at Boyd. The little shit was hunched forward, his shoulders trembling from the effort to remain serious.

Apparently misinterpreting *that* as Boyd crying, the woman shot Cedrick a dirty look. So did the two moms down the table.

"Well / think it's beautiful," the woman reassured Boyd, patting him on the head. "Don't ever stop drawing, sweetie."

She stood up, glared once more at Cedrick, and moved on to the next kid. Cedrick scowled at Boyd's shaking shoulders, and picked up both their pictures. He folded them up and shoved them in his back pocket, then reached over to shove Boyd lightly on his shoulder.

"Alright, wise guy. You ready to go before you lose your cool?"

Boyd was definitely hiding a grin behind the fall of his hair. He nodded and stood, keeping his face tipped downward. Probably to keep from catching that lady's eye so he wouldn't burst out laughing.

Cedrick couldn't be mad, because even as indignant as he was about his dragon drawing—*dragon* drawing, very clearly a *dragon* and a *castle*, where the hell did she get off saying the dragon

was a tree?—there was one thing the volunteer had completely right: Cedrick was proud. The fact she thought a parent drew Boyd’s picture, and that it was good for a parent, said a lot about Boyd's skill level even at five.

As they walked away, Cedrick ruffled Boyd’s hair. Boyd snickered loudly and then caught himself. Cedrick rolled his eyes, but couldn’t stop his own grin.

+ + +

Bedford neighborhood
Lexington, PA

Julian was neck deep in writing up a report about the latest asshole to drop out on child support and his partner’s attempts to track him down via one hot and sexy PI, aka Yours Truly, when he heard the door to the building open. His own office door was mostly closed, so when the person passed down the hallway and didn’t knock he didn’t pay much attention. Especially when they then went straight into the office across the hall.

He rocked one foot back and forth, one hand holding up his cheek while the other scrawled notes on a dirty sheet of paper, splattered and crinkled with brown dots.

Not his fault gravity decided to attack his cup of coffee earlier this morning. If his client took issue, he would advise them to take it up with the laws of physics.

He could have finished the report in another hour, if not for the god-awful noises that erupted in the other office. Some squealing of the highest order, for one. Did Krysta from down the street bring in that damn dog again? She *knew* the ladies lost their shit the second they laid eyes on that tiny little thing.

He tried to ignore it, but the sounds only got louder.

And then he heard it.

A familiar fucking voice.

“Oh my god,” Julian muttered in disgust under his breath, and then for good measure slammed his drawer shut as he stood and shouted, “Oh my god!”

Cedrick’s cheerful laugh made Julian want the superpower ability to manifest pillows to shove in the man’s damn face.

Julian stormed around his desk and to the hall. Oswald Insurance, Inc’s door was wide open, giving Julian the perfect view of the insurance ladies huddled around Cedrick oohing and ahing over something.

“What the fuck are you people doing over here?” Julian demanded as he strode inside. “Some people are trying to work in this place.”

“Julian!” Marie hissed, glaring at him over her shoulder. “Language!”

“Oh come on, since when do you two care about—”

Marie glared, Linda shifted her weight, and Cedrick looked up with a gleeful grin. Julian finally saw what had drawn them like moths to a fucking flame.

Oh.

Julian slowed to a stop with a grimace. He rubbed a hand through his hair, feeling a little abashed.

“Brought the kid again, I see.”

“I did,” Cedrick announced proudly. “I had to show him off. Aren’t you jealous of how cute my kid is?”

“I am.” Linda knelt in front of Boyd and smiled at him like he was Krysta’s little dog she was trying not to scare. With that alien kid, maybe it wasn’t too far from the truth.

“Want some?” she asked, holding out a handful of wrapped chocolate. Boyd looked at it, so she held it closer. “It’s okay. You can have some.”

Boyd stared at her.

Julian snorted.

“Sorry, he doesn’t like sweets,” Cedrick said. “But I’ll take it if you don’t want it. I never turn down a good chocolate.”

“Really?” Linda’s eyebrows shot up. She straightened and absently handed over the chocolate to Cedrick, who happily squirreled it away. “I’ve never met a kid who didn’t like a little chocolate here and there.”

“I know, right?” Cedrick grinned at her and clapped a hand around Boyd’s shoulders, rocking him into a side hug against his hip. “My boy’s really unique. He’s going to be someone important someday, just you watch! He’s really intelligent and mature for his age, and he can draw better than anyone else—he can do anything he wants. He’s already special to me, but I’m telling you now, he’s going to become just as special to everyone else someday.”

“Yeah, yeah, the world isn’t ready for how amazing the kid is, blah, blah.” Julian loped to the desk and rested his ass against the edge. “I’ve heard this a million times, you know?”

“Julian, shut up,” Linda said without heat. “You have no concept of how adorable Boyd is. Or Cedrick is, for how he dotes on Boyd.”

“None!” Marie peered at Julian.

Julian rolled his eyes. He could have commented on how Cedrick didn’t always spend this much time with the kid so he wasn’t always *that* doting, but he didn’t want to get into it. He pushed himself away from the desk and shoved his hands in his pockets, feeling restless.

“What’re you doing here, anyway? With the kid, no less. Doesn’t he go to some god-awful summer school bullshit?”

Marie smacked Julian at the same time that Linda kicked him in the shin. “*Language, Julian!*”

“Ow!” Julian grimaced at the ladies, rubbing his arm. “Abusing me won’t change my mind.”

“We’re having a skip day.” Cedrick beamed at Julian like he was announcing that Boyd won the

goddamn lotto and became the President of the United States on the same day.

Jesus Christ.

This guy.

Julian refused to take the bait. Marie and Linda were much more susceptible, because they were actually friendly little fuckers.

“Skip day?”

“Yep! I called in sick today and I told the school Boyd wouldn’t be in academy today. He’s such a good kid and has been doing so well, I told him he needed a break. So today we’re playing hooky!”

“What are you doing?”

“Everything Boyd likes. We went to Grover Books and played around with some art. I was *very* good at it.”

Boyd made a noise. Cedrick widened his eyes exaggeratedly and looked down at his kid.

“What’s that, son? You want to say something?”

Boyd smiled to himself and looked down at the floor.

Cedrick put a hand behind one ear and rocked Boyd lightly with the other. “Whaaaat? I didn’t hear you. You got something to say about what I said?”

Boyd grinned and shook his head, still not looking up.

“You want to tell them yourself about how I was *sooooo goooooood?*”

Cedrick playfully rocked Boyd around. Boyd snickered.

“Oh come on, don’t be shy. You can tell them. You can tell them Daddy’s better than Picasso! Degas! Da Vinci!” Cedrick reached down and started tickling Boyd around the shoulders, the neck, the underarms. Boyd burst out laughing and squirmed all around out of his reach.

“No, no,” Boyd laughed.

Cedrick grinned and knelt down to get a better tickling angle. “No what? No tickling? No Picasso? Nooooo one’s better than Daddy?”

“No, no!” Boyd laughed even harder and fended off his dad’s insistent fingers. “No, it wasn’t good!”

“What!” Cedrick gasped and pulled back, a hand resting to his heart. “I can’t believe it—my own *son!*”

Boyd giggled and, eyes alight with much more mischief than Julian was accustomed to seeing, darted forward and started tickling his dad. Cedrick fell back dramatically, rolling all around the floor as his son followed trying to tickle him back. Any time Boyd made contact, Cedrick laughed, and any time Boyd got away from retaliation, Cedrick shouted out protests.

“Sacrilege! Scandal! Scoundrel! My own son! My own flesh and blood! Julian! Julian, save me!”

Marie and Linda laughed and jumped out of the way, egging on Boyd. Cedrick bumped into the chair legs and desk legs and human legs pretending to try to get away.

Julian couldn't decide if he wanted to laugh or kick Cedrick. He settled on saying, "You are such an idiot. I think your kid is more mature than you are."

Cedrick rolled onto his back and threw an arm dramatically across his eyes. "Slain! By negligence of my friends, at the hands of my tickle monster son. What a life! What a world! What a time!"

"Oh my god," Julian muttered.

Boyd laughed and kept trying to tickle his dad, until Cedrick peeked from beneath his arm with a wicked grin. "Boyd, don't you think Uncle Julian seems cranky right now? Why don't you tickle him too?"

Boyd paused, eyebrows slanting up, before he turned to Julian. His hands raised in front of him, fingers clawed out.

Julian stumbled backward. "Oh my god."

Before the kid could make haste with the tickle-me-zombie impression, Julian jumped up onto the desk.

"Julian!" Marie yelled. "You're going to knock over my—"

Gravity: 2. Coffee cups: 0.

"Julian!"

Julian paid her no heed. He smirked down at Boyd. "*Ha!* Take *that!* Shorty can't reach up here, can you? Try tickling me when I'm—"

Boyd crawled up onto the chair and reached his grubby little hands for the desk.

"Oh."

Cedrick burst out laughing.

Linda grinned. "Reaaaally didn't think that one through, did you, Jules?"

Julian scrunched his face at her and jumped off the desk before Boyd got to him. Marie grumbled at him from where she knelt, cleaning up the mess that gravity had wrought.

Boyd started carefully crawling down too, his huge alien eyes centered on Julian like a damn missile. Julian threw his hands out in front of him and waved the universal sign of a frantic truce.

"Alright, alright! Uncle, or whatever! Jesus. What did I do to deserve this today, I ask you? I'm just a poor, gentle soul, innocently minding my own business when I'm accosted by everyone around me."

Marie muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, "*I'll show you 'accosted.'*"

Cedrick finally got off his ass and stood up. He dusted himself off but it was futile. Dude probably had twelve months of food crumbs and dirt stuck all over him now.

"I thought it'd be fun to bring Boyd to some places around town he might like, and couldn't decide where to go next. Then we got hungry and we were nearby so I thought I'd swing in and see if you wanted to get lunch."

"Oh really. And what makes you think I want to be seen eating with you?"

“Maybe all the years of experience where you did?”

“But not with the kid.”

“And that makes a difference because...?”

Julian made a face. “It doesn’t make a damn bit of—”

Marie smacked him on the ankle, the only part of him she could reach. Julian scowled down at her and then at Cedrick.

“Scratch that, it does make a difference in one very specific category. Namely, that apparently I have to censor my fu—”

“Julian Jones, go back to your office!” Marie shouted.

Julian was about to tell *her* to go back to *her* office (even though that made no sense) when Cedrick moved between the two of them with an easy smile.

“Marie, Linda, do you mind watching Boyd for a second? I have to go over to Julian’s office real quick.”

Julian quirked his eyebrows, and left the little tickle monster behind in lieu of senior Beaulieu. Linda started saying something to Boyd but Julian didn’t pay attention; he followed Cedrick into his office and shut the door behind them, leaning against it with crossed arms.

“What’s up?”

For once in his life, Cedrick got right to the point. “You know how I told you I think Boyd is getting bullied?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I’m all but positive now. I took him out of the academy for the day to see if I could figure it out, get more information from him, let him know we could take him out of school all summer if he prefers.”

Julian dropped his head back against the door. “What’d he say?”

Cedrick shoved his hands in his pockets and shifted his weight, his gaze glancing away. “He said he likes school and doesn’t want to leave. He seems okay right now, but I’ll have to continue monitoring the situation.”

“Did you talk to the school?”

Cedrick grimaced. “They were useless. I will again, if this continues.”

“Okaaay,” Julian drew out the word, “so what’s this got to do with me?”

Cedrick rubbed the back of his head. “Well, I decided to do a bunch of things Boyd likes today, or bring him places I think he’d like, to give him a break.”

“So you’re giving him a happy day, that’s cool. But again. What’s that gotta do with me?”

Cedrick aimed a sheepish smile Julian’s way. “You’re on that list. Boyd likes you, for some reason—”

“Gee. Thanks.”

“—and I thought he’d really like a chance to spend some time with you today. And you mentioned you were trying to do recon on that alley where that rapist was, right?”

Julian eyed him suspiciously. “Right.”

“I might have a suspect for you. I did some digging of my own and there’s this guy who fits the description, who has a cousin who lives near that alley, and who we got these reports about ages ago at the Sun saying he allegedly sexually assaulted some women at a college out of state but we could never prove anything and the women disappeared. I know he used to be a smoker but I don’t know if he still is, and I haven’t heard his voice to see if it matches the description. But he runs in his spare time so that could make him fast and light on his feet. A few months back he started working at the library, of all places, but I heard he might be moving out of the city soon. As in, allegedly he’s going to finish packing tomorrow, and quit soon after.” Cedrick raised his eyebrows meaningfully.

“And Boyd loves books,” Julian said. “So, you thought you’d get it all done at once—give Boyd a place he’ll enjoy, let him hang with me, while giving me a chance to check out the suspect for Finny before he skips town.” Julian let out a low, impressed breath. “You really know how to multitask, Cedly boy.”

“I don’t want Sex Assault to lose the chance to ID him if he leaves town this week. Even if it turned out Sgt Finley wouldn’t have enough to arrest him before he’s gone, if you can help verify if he’s a viable suspect then you can get Sgt Finley out there in time for him to make contact. If nothing else, at least then he would have a face and name.”

“And fingerprints. Maybe DNA, if I’m lucky. I can get it all to him so he can check the databases, maybe get some better probable cause to catch the guy.”

Cedrick looked at Julian questioningly.

“Listen, if that asswipe is going to hurt women in my neighborhood, I will see to it that fucker doesn’t stay anonymous. You said he works at the library? I’m sure I can find a way to get the guy a much-needed cup of joe on his break.” Julian felt the evil gleam in his own eyes even as he affected an innocent tone. “You know. Being a friendly customer who still remembers that time months ago when he helped me with a project. He probably doesn’t remember me since he sees so many people but I sure do remember him. Made all the difference in the world in my grad school work. Oh, and here, I’ll just throw that away so he doesn’t have to walk all the way to the garbage. Thanks again, man, what a real help.”

Cedrick smiled to himself and shook his head. “You would be a dangerous enemy to have, my friend.”

“You too, if we’re honest.”

“Yeah, well.” Cedrick looked away in dark thought. “I hope so.”

“Alright, so we’re off to the library to catch a maybe-rapist and I guess also borrow some kids books.”

Cedrick laughed. “All in a normal day’s work.”

*** Being an artistic rendition of Cedrick's drawing in Grover Books:*



Six

Saturday July 16, 2005

Vickland neighborhood

Lexington, PA

“—and we’ll have enough time to stop by the art store if you want.”

Cedrick had been talking for eight minutes straight and didn’t think his son had heard a word of it. Boyd trotted along at Cedrick’s side, small hand engulfed in Cedrick’s palm, but his wide eyes had been roaming the streets around them ever since they had left the used clothing store. Cedrick didn’t know what it was that had the five year old so intrigued, but it had left him in an even quieter mood than normal. Used to his son’s quirks, and accustomed to comfortable silence with his wife, Cedrick didn’t think much of it. He filled the gaps with stories and plans for the day the same way he always did. After their highly successful skip day the month previously, Cedrick was making an effort to have more fun days alone with Boyd whenever he could eke it out. This month, Saturday ended up working best.

As they passed down a main thoroughfare, Cedrick felt a tug at his hand and looked back. Boyd had slowed nearly to a stop, his head craning at an awkward angle as he looked intently to the side. When his feet stilled, Cedrick was forced to stop as well. He looked in the direction Boyd was staring, but it was too crowded for him to make out anything other than a bunch of people and some stores.

“What is it?”

Boyd didn’t answer. His fingers tightened on Cedrick’s hand.

Cedrick crouched down. “Boyd?”

He brushed fine blond hair off Boyd’s forehead and tucked it behind his ear, but Boyd only frowned at first. His amber eyes flicked over to Cedrick, back to the shadows, and then with a tick in his eyebrows he looked hesitantly at his father once again.

For a second, Cedrick thought his son might be afraid of whatever he saw, and was about to tug him along in case there was unseen danger he couldn’t detect, but when Boyd spoke all Cedrick felt was perplexed.

“Are we... so very much in a hurry?”

The way that kid worded things, sometimes... Good thing Julian wasn’t here, or he’d probably upgrade Boyd to a British alien now.

“Well...” Cedrick rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t know, really. We need to be somewhere at four but we have time. Why? What’s wrong? Do you have to go to the bathroom?”

Boyd scrunched up his face, as if the very thought of him needing to do something so plebeian as to pee at a time like this was insulting. Cedrick had to hold back a laugh; all he could see was Vivienne in that unnecessarily haughty stare.

“So, I’m... not in trouble if I see something?”

“No, Boyd, of course you aren’t. You’re never in trouble if you see something and you’re never in trouble if you tell me something. Where do you get these ideas?”

Boyd hesitated, his lips moving between pursing to thinning out, before settling into a contemplative frown. He didn’t look away from the direction he’d been staring. After a long moment, he finally spoke.

“I think the skeleton needs help.”

“What?” All Cedrick could see was a bunch of people walking around, going about their busy days without paying much heed to their surroundings. “What skeleton? I don’t—”

But in a gap of people, he saw it.

Her.

An old woman was sprawled on the sidewalk, leaning against a wall at the edge of an alley. Covered in filthy rags, she was pale and gaunt to the point of looking like a skeleton, just as Boyd had said. She stared straight ahead, unmoving. Cedrick felt his heart lurch in the second before she was swallowed up by the crowd again.

Was she dead?

He tightened his grip on Boyd’s hand, wondering how traumatizing it would be for Boyd to see a dead body, but he couldn’t leave his son alone in a crowd, nor could he leave the woman now that he knew she was there. He resolved to hide Boyd’s sight with his leg, if need be, while he got someone out to help bring dignity to her body.

He glanced down at Boyd to see his son looking at him hopefully, and Cedrick gave him a grim smile. “That was a good eye, Boyd. Thank you for pointing her out. We’ll go check on her, okay? We’ll see if she needs help.”

Unmistakable relief loosened Boyd’s features and shoulders, and he nodded. They gripped hands tightly as they wove across the current of people, and emerged on the other side. They were close to the storefronts now, although many of the windows were still boarded. Crater Lake wasn’t more than a handful of blocks away, and people were still leery to settle into the area.

Noise felt unusually muted over here, caught between an unseeing crowd and broken windows like sharp-toothed maws of monsters, ready to swallow passersby into the abyss. The sky had been overcast all day, a steel grey incongruous to the warm summer wind, and that breeze worked against them as they approached the woman.

She smelled like death and decay. Like a life gone rotten, surrounded by people who didn’t care to even look.

Cedrick felt pity for her as strong as he felt injustice on her behalf; that an old woman should decompose not two feet from dozens of people who could have at least placed a blanket over her out of respect.

As they neared, he saw that she was missing most of one arm, and the opposite leg was missing a foot while the stump looked to be overtaken by gangrene. Her eyes were milky and dead, staring straight through the people. Cedrick slowed and then stopped, feeling so very sad looking at her that he didn’t know for a moment what to do.

How could he help a dead woman he didn’t know?

There was a time when calling emergency services would have gotten the right people out there but now, after the bombs, the system was still skewed. So many people continued to die from aftereffects of the bombs, or repercussions from limited food and shelter, that it was pointless calling the cops. Better to go straight to the source on this one. He didn't know what sort of burial she might have wanted, but he could at least call the Medical Examiner's office. Maybe he could track her in the system after her autopsy, assuming they gave her one at all.

They probably wouldn't. At her age and in her shape, it seemed natural causes could be the only reason for her death.

She would probably get thrown out as another Jane in a city of Does.

Cedrick sighed heavily. He reached for Boyd's head blindly, feeling the soft fall of hair catch his fingertips, and tried to turn Boyd's face toward his thigh. He felt Boyd resist.

"What are you doing?" Boyd asked.

Cedrick dug in his pocket for his phone and looked down at it to flip through his contacts list. Maybe Bell would know a better option. Cedrick didn't want the woman thrown out as a Jane Doe with nary a second glance. Maybe if she was filtered through a hospital first it would somehow help. Would the ME come out, anyway? He hadn't needed to call them on a situation exactly like this before. Maybe there was protocol to follow.

"Dad, you have to hurry!"

"It's too late, Boyd. Don't look. I'll get someone to take her away."

Boyd made a noise of discontent and jerked his head out from beneath Cedrick's palm.

"No! You said you'd help. You said you'd help the skeleton!"

"I *am* helping, Boyd, but it's too late to do any—"

"No! You have to call 911! We're suppose to call 911 if someone is hurt or in trouble. That's what the book says, dad! Are you calling 911?"

Cedrick sighed, holding the phone at his side for the moment as he looked sadly down at his son. He'd been hoping to hold off explaining death to his son a few more years. But Boyd was a child of the war, born into death, so that had only been naive optimism on Cedrick's part. In truth, Boyd probably already understood it better than Cedrick liked to believe.

"Boyd," he said heavily. "Sometimes, when people are very old or very sick, even 911 can't save—"

Boyd glared, yanked out of Cedrick's hold and ran over to the woman. He knelt in front of her and shook her shoulders.

Alarm sprung in Cedrick's chest. He sucked in a breath and ran after his son. All he could think of was the possible illnesses festering on the woman, and his baby boy getting something that could land him sick or dying in a hospital—

"Wake up," Boyd was urging the woman. "You have to wake up. My daddy won't call 911 if you don't."

"Boyd! Stop—"

“You have to stop being a skeleton so he sees—”

Cedrick jerked Boyd away from the body, about ready to yell at him in an uncharacteristic display of anger, borne of fear for his safety. But before the words could form, they died instantly in his throat.

The woman’s eyes had shifted; just slightly. Just enough to settle on Boyd’s face before staring through him, as well.

She was alive.

Right up next to the woman, Cedrick could now see that her chest was moving. A most imperceptible of movements, but life nonetheless.

Cedrick’s heart stumbled over itself as he quickly dialed 911. He gave the operator all the information he had in a daze, requesting an ambulance code 3, and watched as his son knelt at the woman’s side and patted the only hand she had.

“Good,” he said, as if she were a dog to be praised. “Now you’ll be okay.”

Cedrick couldn’t bring himself to pull Boyd away again, this time out of fear that his son was the only thing keeping her in this world.

It felt like forever for the ambulance to arrive, even though he knew it couldn’t have been more than a handful of stretched-brittle minutes. When the paramedics descended on her, Cedrick finally pulled Boyd back and out of the way. The crowd had stilled briefly at the drama, but when they saw it was just an old woman and she was already being loaded onto a gurney, the majority of them continued on their way without a second glance.

Anger rushed through Cedrick, tempestuous and impatient. He wanted to yell at them; wanted to demand why the hell they didn’t care about this woman. Why their lives were so much better than hers, just because they weren’t old and alone and seemingly forgotten. He wanted to yell out how pathetic their city was if the only one who saw the woman, the only one who cared, the only one who *fought* for her, was a five year old boy who must have barely been able to glance her through the crowd.

He resolved in that moment that, just as he had decided to do after the war had taken his family, he wasn’t going to stand silent about this. No matter what happened with that woman, he was going to track down her story come hell or high water and he was going to write a goddamn feature piece about her and her life in the Sun—or, if they wouldn’t have it, he’d get it in the next Journalist Guild release.

She wasn’t going to be forgotten any longer. No matter if she lived or died after those ambulance doors shut, she would be remembered more than any of those assholes would be, who had dismissed her the second they’d seen her.

The furious indignation didn’t leave him until the ambulance was loaded. After they took off, Cedrick turned and looked down at his son.

Boyd was watching the ambulance disappear with a worried expression that only heightened when he regarded his father. Cedrick made a conscious effort to remove the tension from his shoulders, his features, so his son wouldn’t mistakenly think it was directed at him.

He pulled Boyd into a one-armed hug against his hip. “We’ll see what happens, okay? We’ll go

get the car and visit the hospital. They'll need time to look at her so it'll be okay if we don't get there immediately. Okay, Boyd?"

Boyd nodded, silent and wide-eyed, and didn't speak for the hour and a half it took them to get home, get the car, and find parking at the hospital. There was only one high quality and fully functioning hospital in the city, still; the other having been destroyed over five years earlier in the bombs.

Westwind was where Boyd had been born, far on the western edge of the city, and there wasn't a day that passed that Cedrick didn't thank every god imaginable that Vivienne had insisted they use the hospital nearer to their home. Cedrick would have gravitated to one in the southern half of the city, because a woman he'd met on the train one day had said her uncle worked there and it was a very good hospital. She'd gone on and on about the doctors and stories of people who had been saved by their trauma center.

But Vivienne had been disgusted by the idea of using a recommendation from some stranger they didn't even know—found on public transportation, no less. She'd said that if she was going to have to spend time in the hospital, it was going to be the best. And, settled over by Glass Town and West Shore Drive, Westwind was in one of the most expensive parts of the city and boasted an impressive facility.

At nineteen and still reeling from being disowned from millions of dollars, in a country across the world that was at war with her homeland, Vivienne had still directly equated the level of worth with the amount of money it cost, whereas Cedrick with his working class background saw worth in word of mouth. But it had been her body going through the pregnancy so he had felt it only right that she got to choose the hospital that made her feel most comfortable, regardless of it digging further into their savings.

In this case, Vivienne had saved their lives.

When the bombs had hit Lexington, they'd decimated the hospital Cedrick would have chosen, and the surrounding neighborhoods had been subject to the initial fallout. They would have died one way or another, just like Cedrick's brother and parents had died when visiting one of those neighborhoods.

Vivienne's contempt had changed everything.

So, despite the pomposity in the overly expensive landscaping and overtly grandiose building, Cedrick felt a sense of nostalgic relief when he rushed Boyd through the front doors of Westwind.

The receptionist seemed ready to look past him, but then she gave Cedrick a second, more searching stare. At first he was too harried to understand why, until he realized why she looked so familiar to him.

Cara Jorgenson, sister of Timothy Jorgenson. Almost five years ago, when they were both teenagers, Timothy had been murdered in their house when Cara had left to find food rations. It hadn't been long after the bombs, which had claimed their parents' lives. Cara had been left suddenly alone, with no one to help her, and no one to find her brother's killer. She'd been desperate when there had been no investigation, and had finally resorted to calling the local news media to see if anyone would pick up the story, maybe put pressure on the police department. Cedrick had been the only one who had listened, and while he hadn't been able to do much through his job, he'd exhausted his resources trying to find someone who could.

It was how he'd first met Julian, the only private investigator who had given a damn about the story when it came with the knowledge that she had no money to pay. With Julian's help, and Julian's contacts in Lexington PD to the decent cops left on the roster, they'd eventually found out who had done it—but there had never been a trial, because the perpetrator had been killed on the streets not long after the murder. He'd been shot for the cash he'd stolen from the house.

When Julian and Cedrick had stopped by her house to tell her that, she had been withdrawn and hollow-eyed. With bloodless lips, she had said, *"I guess there's justice in this world after all."*

"Cara," he said in surprise. "I didn't know you worked here now. How are you doing?"

Maybe it was the genuine concern infused in the last question, or maybe it was simply that she appreciated being remembered years later, but she smiled widely. "I'm... Well, I'm okay. Some days are better than others. I still expect him to walk through the door, but I think over time that will fade." She leaned forward to peer over the counter. "Oh my God. Is that your little one?"

Cedrick grinned proudly. He nodded and grabbed Boyd from under the armpits so he could hoist him up for official presentation. Simba-style. "This is Boyd. Tell Cara hi, Boyd."

Boyd obediently stuck his hand out, which Cara took in slight confusion. He shook her hand while saying politely, "It's nice to meet you, Cara. I'm Boyd. I'm five." He splayed out all the fingers of his free hand, as if she needed help visualizing such a large number.

Despite the fact that he was being held up like a cat slowly falling out of his dad's grip, he managed to sound dignified and solemn. Cara burst out laughing. Cheeks flushed, she grinned even more largely. She stood up so she could lean at a better angle over the desk.

"It's very nice to meet you too, Boyd. Should we have your dad put you down?"

"He won't drop me. He's very strong. My dad could probably lift a car."

"Oh really?" Cara's eyes sparkled. "Is your dad a superhero?"

"Hmm." Boyd considered that with all the solemnity of a five-year-old with his little Sesame Street with trains underwear peeking out from his pants while his shirt rode up past his belly button. "He's not Batman, but he can be close."

Cara laughed again.

"Gee, thanks, son," Cedrick muttered, but he couldn't hide his amusement.

He set Boyd down carefully, straightened his clothes, and then tightly grabbed his hand again. He knew Boyd wouldn't wander off without him but he couldn't help always being terrified of Boyd disappearing in a crowd. The thought of losing his son was so unbearable that even just imagining it constricted his lungs and set his mind abuzz.

He knew, logically, it was probably because his family was killed in the middle of a crowded space. He knew, logically, that it had been in the middle of war, and even if they had been somewhere more sparse the bomb still would have gotten them. He knew it wasn't likely to happen to Boyd right here, right now.

His mind knew all this, but his heart galloped at the very idea of anything happening to his son. At even the idea of losing sight of him in a place where he could be hurt or taken or lost. Death would always be far too close for his liking in this world, but he would gladly give his own life if it meant his boy could be safe.

He gripped Boyd's hand harder.

"So, what are you doing here?" Cara asked, eyebrows furrowing. "Are you visiting someone?"

It was a relief to focus on something other than the mental image of Boyd disappearing, although the topic was hardly less dire.

"Actually, yes. An old woman should have been brought in about an hour and a half ago. We wanted to check her status."

"Hmm." Cara dropped down into her chair and swiveled it back around to face the computers. "What's the name?"

"I... have no idea."

Cara gave him a strange look, and Cedrick felt oddly abashed. He rubbed the back of his neck, his head tipping downward slightly.

"Boyd saw her on the street. She looked dead, but she was still alive. Just very sick. I called 911 and the EMS said they'd bring her here. I promised Boyd we'd check up on her, but I don't know what room she'd be in, and I don't know who she was. She looked like she'd been living on the street for months—maybe years, judging by her condition. And she was an amputee. Is there a way to find her? I can describe her further if you need."

Cara chewed her lip, studying Cedrick, then Boyd. She glanced thoughtfully over her shoulder. "Maybe. Just a sec—let me check with someone first."

Cedrick nodded and obediently stayed at the desk, quietly observing the people around them, while she hurried away.

"Do you think the skeleton wants candy?" Boyd asked.

Cedrick blinked and regarded his son. "What?"

Boyd looked up at him with his huge eyes. "You say it makes you feel better to eat chocolate when you're sad. The skeleton might be sad. Should we buy her chocolate?"

Cedrick smiled and smoothed hair back over Boyd's head. "You're a sweet kid, Boyd. Never lose that. But she probably can't eat chocolate right now. She's sick, and hospitals give healthy food to sick patients to make them better faster. If we brought chocolate, we'd just get in trouble."

"Oh." Boyd regarded Cedrick for a long moment and then looked away decisively. "A book, then."

The smile turned a touch sad, as Cedrick wondered whether she would even be alive for them to bring a book, or if she could see even if she was. He didn't know if her blurred eyes were from disease and exhaustion or if something more had clouded her irises.

"We'll see," was all Cedrick could think to say.

He was spared from having to think of something more by Cara reappearing, her face flushed.

"I just heard the whole story from Kate. You said Boyd saw her?"

Cedrick nodded. "He wouldn't let me leave until I called 911."

Cara's eyes brightened to near tears, and she rushed around the desk. She dropped to her knees and pulled Boyd into a hug.

“Sweetheart,” she breathed into his ear. “Sweetheart, you saved her life. They said if five more minutes had passed it would have been too late, but they got her here in time. She’ll lose a leg but she’s going to be okay.”

Air guttered out of Cedrick’s lungs, leaving him feeling hollow and whole all at once. He looked down at Cara, whose breath hitched as she held Boyd more tightly, while Boyd looked between the two of them in bewilderment.

“Why are you sad? The book said you call 911 to save someone. Dad called 911 so I knew she’d be okay.”

Cara sucked in a breath, and then she was crying against Boyd’s shoulder. Cedrick released his son’s hand, so Boyd could pat Cara lightly on the back in a *there, there* gesture. Cedrick knew this was about more than the woman. Seeing Cedrick so unexpectedly had probably brought all the trauma back to the forefront for Cara, of losing her whole family. Maybe knowing that the woman had been saved by strangers made her feel a little like there was still good in the world, that not everyone was lost like her family had been.

At least, that’s how it felt to Cedrick, who himself was orphaned like Cara.

It didn’t take long for Cara to recover herself. She pulled back, sniffing and wiping her eyes with the back of her wrist. She kissed Boyd on the forehead, lingered in a hug again, and then reluctantly stood. Boyd stared up at the adults with the same unaffected expression from before.

He didn’t seem to understand the importance of what he had done. He didn’t seem to realize that a woman was alive because he’d refused to ignore her pain, even when everyone else did. Including his own father, by thinking she was gone. He’d done something good because it came naturally to him, not because he expected accolades.

Cedrick had never felt prouder of his son in his life.

“So, can we see her?”

Cara nodded. Her eyes were red-rimmed, but she looked happier and more alive than he had ever seen her.

“She’ll be in 820A. She’s still in surgery, so you won’t be able to visit her for a few hours. I could call you to come back when she’s ready?”

Cedrick hesitated, and glanced down at Boyd. “No, I... I think we’ll stay here for a bit. Just in case.”

“Okay, but before you go. Cedrick...”

The weight in her voice caused Cedrick to return his attention fully to her. He faced her curiously, and Cara looked caught in that moment. Her lips lifted in a soft smile, but her eyes shone.

“I wanted to thank you. For everything you did for me before. I had nothing to offer, but you still went out of your way to help a complete stranger...” Cara’s liquid gaze fell on Boyd. “Thank you for passing that on to your son. I really...”

She bit her lip and scrunched her face. “I know how stupid this sounds, but I feel so much better knowing there are people like you and your son in the world to help balance the people who took my brother. My parents. If it weren’t for you, I might be dead. You were the only one who cared. The same way it sounds like your son was the only one who cared about that poor woman.”

Cedrick shook his head. "It's nothing to thank us for, Cara, really. It's what anyone would do."

"No," she said quietly. "It's not."

Cedrick didn't know how to respond to that, and luckily he didn't have to formulate a reply because Cara flashed him an enigmatic smile and pointed toward a set of elevators back and to the right. "Take one of those elevators and not the other ones around the corner, or you won't be able to access the right wing. Go to the eighth floor and when you get off, hang a left. There's a lounge you can use while you wait."

"Thank you, Cara. And—I'm happy see you here. I'd wondered what happened to you. I'm glad to see you seem to be doing well."

Cara smiled that gentle smile again and shook her head. "That, too, is something not everyone would do."

"What isn't?"

"Care, or remember. Your family... Your family really is a blessing."

If Cara saw such good in Cedrick and Boyd for doing what was right and what any normal person should do, he wondered if she would be able to see the good in Vivienne as well—or if she would retract her statement if she ever met Cedrick's wife. He wanted to believe Cara would know, the way Cedrick had always known. He wanted to believe that Cara could be the stranger who would not ignore Vivienne.

But he would likely never know, and even if he did, he knew Vivienne wouldn't care what some random woman thought of her. She never did. She couldn't, because almost no one understood her and if she let herself be brought down by those who didn't, she would spend her life moored in depression that would never let her leave the house.

Cedrick dismissed the idea the way he dismissed so many thoughts that moved through his mind constantly, always reading stories into the experiences around him.

He was about to walk away when he stopped and regarded Cara.

"Oh right. What's the name of that woman? So we know what to call her when we see her."

"Oh." Cara consulted the computer and then looked up. "Looks like her name is Jezebel. Jezebel Aldrin."

+ + +

Saturday July 16, 2005
Westwind Hospital, Financial South neighborhood
Lexington, PA

"Why did we have to come back?"

Cedrick mused how his five year old son passed the gift shop without a second glance but Cedrick, the twenty-five year old dad, slowed and eyed the wares longingly. The notebooks! They had

his favorite sizes, although a bit more melodramatic in style than he preferred. He didn't really need something gold and flowery proclaiming "be well" on it, but—but then again, it looked like it would fit into his back pocket well, and there was something to be said about hiding important notes in plain sight, and...

No.

Shaking his head to himself, he tugged Boyd along as he sped his walk. He had entirely too many notebooks already. Soon, they would run out of room in the library and Vivienne would not be pleased.

She actually *liked* the library.

On the rare days she wasn't working or doing errands or otherwise engaged, sometimes he found her curled in the library's corner chair with her hair tumbling over her shoulder as she slowly flipped the pages. Her free hand would be curled around a warm mug of jasmine tea with milk. Once upon a time she had scoffed at the addition of milk but after his mom had introduced it to her, she had continued to add it even on her own, even after his mother had passed.

Sometimes on those days, when he walked into the room and if she was really taken with a story, she wouldn't notice his presence until he was behind her and kissed her on the neck. On those days she would turn, startled, and her sky blue eyes would be unguarded. He would get the luxury of her flushing cheeks, and a flash of the smile that had broken his heart and mended it back together the first time he'd seen it. A genuine, brilliant pull of her lips that brightened her entire face and made her, for once, look her actual age, if not even younger.

It would remind him of when they had been teenagers, back in France when they'd first met. The time it had taken him to win her over, to convince her he wasn't just trying to use her or hurt her; that he wasn't mocking her or demanding she become an entirely different person to become someone worthwhile.

The time it had taken her to believe in the idea that someone could like her for who she was, not who they wanted her to be.

On those library days they were years younger again, and it was the first time he saw her smile, the first time he heard the clear bell of her laugh, the first time she gripped his hands and danced on light feet backward, facing him and smiling while the wind swept her hair into a pirouette circling to the sky.

It was all the many firsts in one moment; all the times he got a glimpse of the fierce and lighthearted woman she might have been if her grandmother had let her be human.

On those days, she would kiss him on the cheek and run her fingers through his hair, gently, so gently, and he would rest his forehead on her and take solace in the warmth of her presence. On those days, they were a team again, and nothing he'd done or not done had ever pulled them apart.

But those were rare days, when he had the chance to see that breathless smile. Rare days, when she didn't look at him the second he walked into the library with her flawless features that couldn't help being guarded even at home.

Still, she was more relaxed in the library than anywhere else. Still, she felt more accessible there, with her blond hair a gentle roll down her front, and her shirt dipping down over one shoulder, and her eyes the most beautiful blue he had ever seen.

After years of stasis, those quiet library days had been increasing again lately, which he took to be a sign that she was finally starting to heal from the death of his family. She'd been hit even harder than Cedrick had been by their loss. It had devastated her to such a depth that for so long, she had been a shadow of herself.

For so long, he had worried he would lose her, too.

"Dad?"

Cedrick looked down at Boyd's cocked head. People often made fun of Cedrick for how quickly he got lost in his own thoughts, and after a point they tended to stop bothering him about it and left him to his own devices. They grew accustomed to him leaving questions unanswered. Boyd, whether through youthful oblivion or stubbornness, never did.

Cedrick had to search his memory for what Boyd had asked before he could reply. "It's Saturday so they had restricted visiting hours, and she wasn't stable enough for visitors this morning."

"Is she stable enough now?"

"That's what we're here to find out."

They stopped at the front desk, finding Cara gone; whether it was past her shift or she was just on break, he didn't know. The stop was much quicker this time, and within minutes they were in the elevator. It was completely silent in there, and for once Cedrick missed the elevator music.

He watched the others in the elevator instead: a young man with arms tightly crossed and red-rimmed eyes, who didn't stop rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. He stared at the slowly shifting numbers announcing what floor they were on, with a gaze that burned intently. Next to him, a middle-aged woman gripped a little girl's hand; the girl looked younger than Boyd, and seemed oblivious to the tears tracking the woman's cheeks. In the other corner was an old man so wizened that his features were mere fluctuations in the rise and fall of the skin on his face.

Cedrick constantly wondered what the story was of people he saw. He built fables in his mind; sometimes dramatic, sometimes heartbreakingly not.

For these strangers, he built a story:

The young man, he decided, was named Max. Max had always tried to find love in the girlfriends he'd had in high school, but it never worked out. Something was missing. In his first year of college, he met Trevor. They became best friends and Max had never been happier. They spent all their free time together, and sometimes even skipped classes to go on spontaneously-devised adventures. Max's favorite thing to do was urban exploration, and Trevor had decided to go with him last night. They were looking for ghosts, which was particularly alarming for Trevor who refused to acknowledge just how afraid he was of the supernatural. They had visited the old, abandoned hospital in Carson City; rumored to have housed the worst psychiatric patients the state had ever seen.

Cedrick had visited the hospital once, and even as someone who was fascinated by mysteries and the supernatural, he had found it to be unbearable. The air had felt suffocating, metallic; the taste of blood, accompanied by the faint ringing of screams he swore he could hear in the far, far distance. The shadows had seemed so much darker, an umber hue on the edges but fading so quickly to pitch black it was akin to sharp drops in the sea floor.

That was how it had felt to Trevor, when he'd gone: the cold flutter of air on his skin like

skeletal fingers dancing across his back; the creaks of the old building settling like the cracking groan of bones grinding against one another; the piercing silence as the pause right before Death drew in a rattling, endless breath. Trevor's heart had been a drum line in his chest; tripping over beats and melodies but staying enough of a tune to keep him alive.

When they had reached the top floor, Trevor had been jumpy and frightened. When something crashed and screeched on another floor, Trevor had thrown himself backward.

Not seeing the gaping hole open beneath him.

He'd fallen.

Thankfully only to the next floor, with detritus to slow his fall. But in that second when Trevor had disappeared, and in the subsequent scream and choking gasp shot straight to silence, Max had felt his world end. He'd raced downstairs, frantic and unable to understand the maze of the corridors in his panic, until finally he'd located Trevor unmoving on the pile.

Max had run up to him, fingers slipping and hands shaking as he had searched for a pulse, as the flashlight had woven and bobbed with his actions, making it impossible for him to see if Trevor's chest moved. It had seemed like forever before Max had felt it: a pulse, shuddering only slightly, and it had seemed like another portion of eternity until Max could figure out how to get Trevor out of there. There were no ambulances in Carson City, no one but scavengers to find them weak and ripe for attack. It had taken him entirely too long, but he'd managed to fashion a gurney out of a rickety old rolling table and a slab of desk that had broken beneath Trevor in his fall. Entirely too long before Max had been able to place Trevor in the car—carefully, so carefully so as not to hurt or twist his back—and far, far too long to get him back to Lexington.

Here, to Westwind.

Trevor had been in the ICU the night before, and Max had spent every second here since. Raw on the corners and withholding tears so hard it reddened his eyes anyway; turned them bright and sharp on the edges while his hands clenched buried beneath the opposing arm. His jaw worked; tightening and loosening, grinding the teeth and then not.

He hadn't been able to stand still since he'd had a revelation the night before:

He loved Trevor.

He loved Trevor, and he was bi—or gay, or, hell, he didn't know what he was anymore. All he knew was his best friend meant the world to him and now he knew Trevor might not be okay because of him.

Even if Trevor ended up being okay, that Friday night had shifted the entire paradigm of Max's existence.

And Max was terrified of letting anyone know.

Terrified that somehow, some way, someone would notice, and they would tell Trevor when he finally woke up, and Max would lose his friend all over again.

Better, he thought, to keep it all in. Better, he believed, to deny.

So he held himself tight and brittle-strong. He shifted his weight relentlessly, and he stared so hard forward that no one would know to look at him twice. No one would know what he'd realized he'd become, or maybe—maybe had been all along.

The elevator dinged loudly, drawing Cedrick sharply out of his thoughts. The young man—the ostensible Max—let out a quiet hiss and all but ran out of the elevator. He left in long-legged strides, loping across the open area toward the windows showing a helplessly bright summer afternoon beyond.

Cedrick sighed and leaned back against the elevator wall. He'd liked the story he'd started to build for the man he'd randomly named Max. Now he was sad to see the guy go, and was too attached to the mythical Trevor to want to commit himself to a story for the other occupants. Even so, he studied them thoughtfully when they weren't looking, until the doors dinged again.

This time, it was his stop.

Boyd fell in step beside Cedrick, weaving through the twists and turns of the hospital until they reached their goal.

820A.

The door was open, but at first Cedrick couldn't see anything other than a portion of a crisp white hospital bed, closed cabinet doors in the back wall, and a window with the blinds pulled down. He glanced at Boyd as if to silently ask if he was ready, to which Boyd gave him the silent reply of, *"I've been ready all along, I don't know what you're talking about."*

Cedrick's lips twitched at the thought that he was building stories for his own son now, too. Always putting words to others' actions; meaning to their glances. It had been that way for him his whole life. Maybe it was why he could read into people like Vivienne and find the woman to love when so many others stopped at a person to hate or misunderstand.

To Cedrick, it had always been about the depths and the uncertainties; the silence and the stories.

He knocked on the door lightly, peering around the edge as he called out, "Hello?"

There was no answer, and inexplicably Cedrick glanced at Boyd again. Like a five year old would know any better what to do in this case than someone twenty years his senior. Cedrick almost snorted to himself, but thought that it might make him seem even odder to poor Jezebel than he was liable to be on his own.

He stepped into the room, the door creaking in a way that made him wince. Boyd was a dark shadow at his hip, silent and observant.

"Ms. Aldrin?"

The room seemed empty at first. Then, they moved so they could see around the half-drawn curtain, and Cedrick found the woman lying on the bed.

She looked only marginally better. Death still seemed to have a hold on the old woman, if nowhere stronger than her expression. An IV fed into her wrist, there was a bandage over the edge of her missing arm, and the sheet traveled over one long and knobbly leg to her foot, while it fell to an abrupt halt on the other thigh. Her skin looked paper-white and just as thin and fragile; great dark circles pressed around her eyes as the shadows in a skull, and her collarbone rose as a mountain against the ridges of her chest just above her gown.

But it was her eyes that made Cedrick ache.

She stared sightlessly at the meeting of the ceiling and the wall, hardly blinking, hardly

breathing. If it weren't for the machines telling him she was alive, Cedrick might have thought she was little more than a mummy yet to be wrapped.

Cedrick hadn't noticed he'd lost Boyd's hand until he saw his son appear next to Jezebel's bed. Cedrick hesitated, feeling as if he were intruding on the woman in the first place, and not knowing whether Boyd was only making it worse—but the silence felt too heavy, too strong, to risk being broken. So he stayed there, electric and unknowing; watching the scene unfold the way his son watched the woman.

She didn't react at first. She stared at the ceiling as Boyd stared at her, until he raised his hand and placed it gently on her wrist. He was clearly very careful not to touch her IV, not to touch anything but her skin. Whether it was the warmth of his hand or the size of it that drew her attention, Cedrick didn't know. But finally her eyes moved; slowly, catching and sliding along the way as if her body were unused to the motion. Or any motion at all.

Her head dropped to the side, and her eyes settled on Boyd. He watched her calmly, his hand unmoving from hers.

“Hello, grandma.”

The intake of her breath felt momentous and loud, for how subtle and quiet it was. Cedrick didn't dare move from where he hovered, and didn't dare speak when Boyd patted her arm. Cedrick realized that the wavering of her shoulders belied silent sobs.

They stayed there the whole two hours that they were allowed for visiting hours, and although Cedrick eventually sat in a chair where she could see him, Jezebel never spoke or acknowledged him. Her watery eyes stayed on Boyd the whole time, and even when he sat in a chair at her side he didn't let go of her arm. He didn't speak again, either; he just watched her while she watched him; letting her exist in the small space of reality she was able to carve out for herself right now.

She fell asleep before their time was up and a nurse stopped in to check on her. Cedrick quietly gathered Boyd in his arms, holding him to his chest rather than letting him walk at his side. He felt the weight of pain and loss from that silent room, and he wanted the comfort of Boyd's small heartbeat resounding in his chest. They left the room shortly before the nurse, who caught up to Cedrick before he could leave.

She wore pale blue scrubs in a faint paisley pattern, and her hair was held back by a headband. She touched Cedrick's arm to slow him down, and didn't speak until he'd turned.

“Are you Jezebel's family?” she asked, and Cedrick had to shake his head.

“No, we're just visiting.”

Boyd turned his head from where it had been buried in Cedrick's neck. When he faced the nurse, Cedrick saw understanding brighten her features.

“Oh,” she said significantly. She reached out, pushing hair from Boyd's eyes. “You're the one who saw her, aren't you, honey? They told me it was a pretty little boy like you. They *didn't* tell me you had such beautiful eyes.”

“I don't know where he got it,” Cedrick explained, the way he always did when people commented on Boyd's amber eyes. The next question was always ‘oh are his mother's like this?’ or ‘oh, does this run in the family?’ “My family was mostly brown or hazel and my wife's was mostly blue.

He just got lucky, I guess. It's a pretty rare color. Did you know they call it wolf eyes?"

"I can see why." She smiled at Boyd, who only stared solemnly in return. Her smile turned a touch sad, and she ran her hand back over Boyd's hair even as she tipped her eyes up to Cedrick. From this angle, he could see the tag on her scrubs, giving her name as Cierra.

"Poor Ms. Aldrin," Cierra said. "She's been quiet the whole time she's been here. We don't know if she has family, if she will have a place to stay when she's eventually released... anything. I've tried asking her when I go in there but all she does is stare."

"Will they be doing a psychological evaluation if this continues?"

"Most likely, yes. Especially given her age and condition when she was brought in. But when I saw she had visitors, I have to admit I really hoped her family had come to help her, or at least keep her company."

"How long do you expect she'll be kept here?"

Cierra sighed heavily and, with a light pat on Boyd's head, she straightened. "It's hard to say right now. She was severely malnourished when she was brought in, and with the amputation we'll need time to monitor it to ensure there are no complications. Then she'll need therapy and will have to learn how to use a wheelchair or, possibly, be fitted for an artificial limb. At her age, we have to be even more careful. It will be a month at least, if not much longer depending on her health and recovery period."

"Can we visit her again?"

A smile like the sun broke out on Cierra's face. "Of course. If she's okay with it. But—" Dark eyelashes sheltered the thoughts in her eyes when she looked back at 820A. "I have a feeling she needs that connection, even if right now she doesn't realize it."

"Yeah." Cedrick thought of that thousand-yard stare. "I think you're right."

Cierra patted Cedrick on the arm, flashed Boyd another smile, and then excused herself to continue her work. Cedrick was lost in thought as he carried Boyd out of the hospital. It was easy to get wrapped up in his mind when Boyd was around; he asked so little of his parents, and brought so little attention to himself, that Cedrick's natural tendency to lapse into rumination often took over without him even realizing he was doing it.

The abrupt ring of his phone from his back pocket made him jump, automatically tightening his hold on Boyd in protection.

As if Doctor My Eyes blaring from his ass was really a portent for an attack on his kid.

Cedrick snorted at his own idiocy, and balanced Boyd with one arm while he dug around for the phone. He caught it right before it went to voice mail.

"Yeah?" he asked breathlessly, knowing by the ring tone who it would be. He held the phone precariously between his cheek and shoulder. His arms were starting to ache from Boyd's weight but he couldn't bring himself to set his son down, even though he was almost certainly too old to be carted around like this.

"You alright?" came Bell's deep voice.

"I'm fine. Why?"

“It’s release day and usually you’re around, or at least call to ask if it all went smoothly. I expected a call or visit hours ago, but when it never happened I grew worried.”

“Shit!” Cedrick’s gaze darted all around, as if a schedule would magically appear on the hospital wall or the close-up view of his son’s hair. “I completely forgot—I’m sorry. Something happened earlier today and I lost track of time.”

“Something bad?” Bell cut in sharply, protectiveness and worry all rolled into one.

“Sort of, but it’s not what you’re thinking. I’ll tell you about it later. Suffice it to say, everyone’s fine, we were never in danger, there’s nothing to worry about. I was so consumed with following through that I forgot about everything else.”

A soft laugh rolled across the line. “Sounds about right. Cedrick Beaulieu always has to see it through to the end of the story.”

Cedrick chuckled. “Know your weaknesses, as they say.”

“And your strengths. It’s that too, Cedrick. Never forget.”

Cedrick made a verbal noise that amounted to a shrug.

“Well,” Bell said as he drew in a great breath. “No harm done. It went as smoothly as ever, so you can desist any retroactive worrying you might have started since the beginning of this conversation.”

Cedrick laughed. “It’s possible you know me a bit too well.”

“Can’t ever be too well for a friend. Take care of yourself. I’ll see you next month.”

“You too.”

He nearly said Bell’s name aloud, but didn’t. It was possibly paranoia or possibly smart thinking, but they only called each other by name if the one speaking it was in a secure location. They were certain of the security of the line itself, but one never knew who might be eavesdropping on one half of the conversation. One never knew what small pieces of information they might accidentally drop in a conversation that could build up to a much greater, more ominous whole in the wrong hands.

It was for the same reason that they never said the names JG or the Journalist Guild over the phone. Just in case someone overheard. Just in case their anonymity was compromised.

Bell hung up, and Cedrick returned the phone to his pocket. He was silent a breath, and then looked over at Boyd.

He offered his son a grin. “So. Who’s up for the art store?”

Boyd released one small hand from Cedrick’s neck to raise it in the air.

“Okay!” Cedrick enthused. “And who’s going to pay?”

Boyd put his hand down.

Cedrick laughed. “Cheapskate.”

Seven

Sunday July 17, 2005

Cedar Hills neighborhood

Lexington, PA

Vivienne knelt in the dusty attic, the only place she felt safe from prying eyes. Her gaze, as always, strayed to the box that held her deepest treasure. And, as always, she made her gaze move away.

She had chosen her path and she did not regret it. She did not make choices lightly, and refused to question actions she had made to the best of her ability at any given time. Doubt was the path toward self destruction, as far as she was concerned; the path that only the weak and insecure took.

Still, there were days that drew her up here again, away from her husband, away from the child that haunted this house. Up, up to where she could breathe freely with the trapdoor shut and the darkness surrounding her in comfort.

Cedrick was asleep, as was their son. Although Cedrick had difficulty falling asleep, once he achieved it he could sleep through anything. Their son never strayed from bed once he had settled in—whether it was because he slept through noises or was intelligent enough to not bother anyone, she did not know. It was a small thing she could be grateful for on nights like this. A small thing she wished could be part of a greater whole, but no matter how hard she tried it didn't seem to happen.

When he had first come screaming into her arms, she had felt a detachment she had never expected. Exhaustion and a need to get away. From when he had been growing inside her to even now, years later, there were days on end where she barely wished to eat. Days where she found solace at her work because it was easier to concentrate on her expectations as a professional than it was to confront her inability to be the perfect mother, or even a proper mother at all. She was used to excelling at what she put her mind toward, yet her inability to meet even the most basic of expectations of motherhood felt like a betrayal; whether of her own mind and body, or of society, or of her son, or anything else, she could not always decide.

Perhaps it had been that or something else that had made his red, crying face bring to mind the image of the Nain Rouge. Vivienne had once met a woman from Detroit who, upon learning Vivienne was French, had talked at length about the Nain Rouge and how she viewed it.

Harbinger of doom, she called it. And Vivienne's first sight of her only child had brought that swiftly to mind.

Vivienne had tried to ignore the thought, but perhaps her addled mind had known best. Only days later, the war had taken Vivienne's family, and everything had twisted in Vivienne's life from then on.

It was in memory of that family that she was here now.

As had been the case since she had birthed that child, she had been unable to sleep; caught

forever in the shroud between dreams and the waking world. That restlessness had drawn her from the warmth of Cedrick's side, down the quiet hallway, up the stairs, up the ladder, to sit with her knees pulled to her chest, where her gaze was drawn again, again to that box.

It was Amy's birthday.

Did Cedrick remember this and pointedly not speak of it each year? Or had he forgotten, now that the date no longer held significance?

It would always be meaningful to Vivienne.

Today, Cedrick's mother Amy would have turned fifty. Today, Vivienne would have insisted on bringing her somewhere special; buying her something beautiful. She would have made Amy breakfast if Cedrick or his father Braeden had not. She would have sat by her side and felt the comfort of her presence.

In a world that had not seemed ready to accept Vivienne since the sudden death of her parents when she was eight years old, Vivienne had grown accustomed to keeping everyone at a distance. She had come to expect negativity sent her way. It no longer bothered her, because her grandmother's lessons had worked. Mireille had taught Vivienne how to live in a world like this and how to rise above it. To not care what others thought, so she could be free to do what she believed was best.

Life is war, her grandmother had told her since she was brought, orphaned, to Mireille's Parisian home. Do not lose yourself in the battles. Think always of the long strategy. If you plan ahead, you will always win.

She had taught Vivienne all of that, and yet a part of Vivienne had never stopped aching for the loving warmth she remembered of her mother's arms. A part of her could not stop being that eight year old child, with the last memory of parents who smiled at her and held her close and sang soft, sweet French lullabies when she was tired or scared. She could not forget her mother, who had taught her how to ride her first horse, or her father who had given her a colt and had stayed by her side that first time she had climbed astride, his hands spread to catch her if she should fall. A colt she had childishly named Venteux, for the feeling of the wind rushing past her when she rode.

No matter how hard Vivienne had tried, she could not make those memories disappear. No matter how much Mireille had helped her, that piece of Vivienne would not leave.

Still, Vivienne had thought she had successfully buried those memories, that past weak and vulnerable self, until she had walked into Cedrick's childhood home for the first time.

Until she had met his mother Amy.

The bright smile that had filled Amy's features; the open arms that had been there immediately, engulfing Vivienne before she had a chance to speak. That warm voice in her ear welcoming her with the Québécois accent Vivienne had teased Cedrick about in Paris. Amy's accent was even a bit different than that, retaining a touch of her American Northeastern drawl pulling the vowels and consonants into a new shape.

She remembered the way Amy had anticipated Vivienne's needs: the cup of tea or coffee she made before Vivienne even thought to ask; the presence of a woman at her side who understood, who didn't judge, on the nights Vivienne had cried endlessly about her pregnancy and had been too scared to let Cedrick see.

The mother Vivienne had yearned for since her own had died, her birth mother denigrated by her grandmother again and again until Vivienne had thought love could only be a weakness, and idealism the greatest of crimes.

But then Cedrick had come into her life and he had brought his family with, and Vivienne had known the warmth of belonging again. She had known she wasn't alone in this world, in this war known as life.

She had been wrong, perhaps, to believe in that future.

She had been foolish, it seemed, to forget her grandmother's warnings.

It had all started with that Nain Rouge.

Child of misfortune; soulless it seemed at times, with eyes that burned their way through everything. Staring endlessly as a demon might at a city to learn and mimic human behavior.

She didn't believe in demons; not really. She didn't truly think him of the devil. There was nothing supernatural at work, in all likelihood.

And yet.

And yet, every hatred that had been visited upon her externally or internally, every loss she held gathered in empty arms, she felt could be tied back to the moment that child was conceived in thought. And most especially after he had been birthed into this world.

It was true that the hatred had started far earlier; true the loss had gone back to her childhood, long before he existed. But those small and large sufferings had happened in another country, what felt like another world and another life now far removed from her own.

Here was where she was supposed to have a new chance. Here, in North America.

And here was where he had made Amy die.

Cedrick's family would have been safely in Canada if not for Boyd. They would not have been in Lexington, in that neighborhood where the bombs destroyed everything, if he had not been born the day he was born.

His birth was the dawn of the death of everyone Vivienne had left to love.

The bare light bulb moved subtly in a breeze she could never feel. The silence of this span of the house was refreshing and complete. The pressure she felt every waking moment, the suffocation of breathing, of existing, of moving through the everyday battle of life, felt at home here in this claustrophobic corner of their home.

She could see the war of life play out here, again and again, and here she could pause between the battles for fugitive, ephemeral rest.

And so this war had led her here, alone in a dusty attic, perched against a wall with her long hair catching and holding onto the rough wood. And she squeezed her tired, burning eyes shut to keep them from drifting again, again, to that box.

She had arrived in Paris with so little to her name; with only one item from her dead parents. She had left France, disowned, with so little in her possession.

But there was one thing she had been certain to bring. One trinket; the only gift she had left

from her mother Alette.

She had wanted something from her grandmother who had been kind and loving, Alette's mother Éliane who had joyfully shouted encouragement when Vivienne had rushed by on Venteux's back. But Éliane had not wanted her, Mireille had told Vivienne; not after Alette was gone. And then Éliane had died. Like she deserved, Mireille had said, for birthing that demon Alette into the world.

Vivienne had not been permitted to bring any memories of Éliane or her mother to her new home. The only reason Mireille had let her keep her last and, now, only gift from her mother was because Vivienne had told Mireille it came from her father Jacques; from Mireille's beloved son.

Everything else was gone; pared down to that singular souvenir now turned, unerringly, into a legacy.

Everything that mattered to that eight year old girl who had been told her parents were dead and now she had to move across the country to an estranged grandmother—everything for her was in that box.

Vivienne had thought she would show Amy, one day, this gift from her mother. She had believed, one day, she could see what her new mother thought of it.

That would never happen now.

Both of Vivienne's mothers were dead.

Vivienne opened her eyes and watched the dust dance and gather in the yellow swatch of light.

"Joyeux anniversaire," she whispered, a dry and catching voice in the night. "Je t'aime, maman."

She pulled her legs closer to her chest and rested her chin on her knees. She fell quiet, contemplative, and then continued the tradition she had secretly created from the time Amy had died.

There was no body for them to mourn; no true grave she could visit. Cedrick observed the anniversary of his family's death, but Vivienne thought it was important, too, to remember the anniversary of his mother's life.

And so, even though she was well aware Amy was dead and disintegrated and decomposed back into the earth, every year on July 17 she murmured about her day, about the past year of her life since she had last updated Amy.

Today, she told Amy about Boyd's lessons, because she knew Amy would have loved to know. After all, Amy had once promised a shaking and frightened nineteen-year-old Vivienne, who had whispered her deepest fear that the dark and twisted feeling she felt during her pregnancy would never leave and she would never be capable of loving that child the way a mother was supposed to—Amy had promised that terrified and ashamed Vivienne that it would get better, and if it didn't then Amy would be there for her. She had promised that vulnerable Vivienne that she would help.

She had promised that anxious Vivienne that she would not navigate this frightening path alone. No matter what. Because Vivienne would always have a friend and mother in Amy.

That promise had burned to ash alongside Amy's body. But Vivienne still spoke to a ghost she didn't believe in, because she did believe in the kindness of that woman's soul when she had lived.

“He excels at French,” she told that sightless soul now in French. “I hardly need to teach him a word before he integrates it and understands its nuances.” She turned her head so her cheek caught against the thin fabric of her night dress. Her eyes strayed, again, to the box. “He’s very intelligent. Cedrick is proud. He’s certain he’s ahead of his age, and I agree. I believe it is likely he will...”

Her words faded, lost in the comforting compression of the night. The sentence she had planned to form was gone as if it had never existed, and her mind undulated with the change.

She could not lie to Amy, whether she was ghost or human; whether she lived or was lost. It had always been that way. Such had been the unending comfort of Amy, knowing she had unerring support.

Cedrick loved Vivienne. He saw someone human, when everyone else had only ever seen a beast. When her own grandmother had treated her as if she were inhuman. Cedrick always took all of her words, no matter how cutting or short they may be, and he transformed them into things of beauty that made her believe even in her own humanity. He reflected back to her a woman worth loving, not worth leaving.

And it was for that reason there were some truths she was too terrified to ever tell him.

I do not want a child.

I never want to be a mother.

I cannot be a mother.

I have always loathed the idea.

I have always found it demeaning and frightening.

I have never wanted to be burdened by that responsibility.

It was always the life I said I absolutely did not want.

I told my grandmother again and again, no, no, when she said it was inevitable and she would form my future around it— when she tried to take away my control and wished to force it on me, I said no, no, never, no.

Words she had never been able to say to him, caught and caustic in her throat; corrosive in her heart.

Words she had let leave, quaking, from her lips only ever in the protective presence of Amy, far from the ears of anyone else.

Amy had listened. Amy had not condemned her. Amy had not said all the words everyone else had ever said for why a woman could not dare say that; why it was not allowed to want her own life, or a life with a husband, without the requirement of a child in that future.

Why a woman was only as good as her womb.

Her entire meaning and life and personality and dreams, siphoned down to be judged by the usage of one organ.

Amy had listened.

Amy had hoped the love would come, and had promised to aid even if it didn’t.

Amy had let her be truthful, raw and vulnerable and revealing of all her undesirable parts, in a

way even Cedrick could not fulfill because Vivienne was too frightened of the idea of losing his love. The love she had left everything in her life to pursue.

And so here, this night, the night of Amy's birth fifty years ago, Vivienne could not continue with that superficial update when so many other words crowded her lungs.

"Amy," she said quietly, and should have been horrified to hear her voice crack. Would have been, if not for that shroud descending again so heavily on her throat; her heart; her mind.

It was a welcome distance; a wall that separated her from the wild depth of emotions. Something she had once viewed with freedom, that independence of feeling, that capability of extreme emotions, but now in her maturity she knew to be folly.

Mireille had taught her that feelings, that love and emotions, were weaknesses. Unprotected joins in the armor that kept her safe in the war of life. The quickest path to failure.

And yet...

"I wanted to feel that love."

She hadn't wanted to say it aloud, hadn't meant to, but for as quiet as the sounds were, it ripped her apart inside. She pressed cold palms into the heat of her closed eyes, her back curved gently against the dark.

"I never wanted him but when I knew I had to have him, I wanted it to change. I wanted—I wanted to understand. I wanted one piece of my life to not be a struggle, looking from the outside in. I wanted to hold him and hold no grudges, I wanted to feel the joy Cedrick did, I wanted..."

She sucked in a breath, thin and sharp and cutting.

"But I don't know how, Amy, I *don't*." She felt her dry eyes grow heavy. Maybe another person would have cried but she couldn't. "My grandmother taught me to be strong, not weak. She taught me to deny all this. I don't know what it is to be a mother. I only know how to be a warrior. I love Cedrick, I would leave everything for him, but I don't know how to feel love that isn't there. I don't know how to force myself to not—"

—be a monster.

The words were unbidden in her mind, held close by the clawed fingers of her memories. Her grandmother's voice, soothing in her ears.

Monster, Vivienne, you are nothing but a—

She stopped herself, pulsed her fingers to feel the dig of her fingernails into her palms, and dropped her arms to her side. Felt the catch of the floor against her skin. She stayed there, a still statue, every muscle taut as she fought to regain the control she had briefly let herself lose.

It took time.

A deep breath in and another out.

Again.

Again.

With the surge of emotion leaving, she felt emptied out and exhausted. It was a feeling as corrosively comforting as it was familiar, and yet...

She didn't say the words she was thinking:

You were supposed to save me from this.

You were supposed to be here to guide me.

I thought you could be his mother if I could not.

I thought, with you, we could all find relief.

I hoped we could all be happy.

I need you but you aren't here.

Instead, she said another truth; one just as deep but not as painful. Something else to tell Amy, a calmer truth to forget what she had almost said aloud.

"Lately, I struggle."

She watched the light move with more life along the worn wooden floor than she felt lately in her own heart.

"I can't sleep at night. I wake, again and again, and in the morning it's difficult to rise. For more than this reason, during the day I am so tired. I spend all my energy at my work, and when I return I don't want to think, or move. When I see Cedrick and Boyd so easily able to interact, when I watch them share smiles I cannot join, I feel lost in my own family. I feel peripheral. I begin to fear losing Cedrick's love; his strength. Without you here to support me, I fear it will happen. I feel so tired all the time, and yet I still cannot sleep."

The dust settled slowly, gracefully, to the floor.

"It's a cycle I have felt many times since you left. I felt it, too, when Boyd was growing inside me. There are days I have no troubles, and everything feels right. And there are days I wonder how long this will stay until I can be free of it." She closed her eyes, and let the disquiet take hold of her words.

"Will I be free of it, maman? Or is this another war I must fight as long as I live?"

There was no answer, and she did not expect one. She voiced the doubts to the confessional of death, and knew no advice would ever break that hold.

Maybe Amy would have known the answer. Maybe she would have told Vivienne what to do. But she was gone and only Vivienne and Mireille remained.

But Vivienne could not ask Mireille, either. Vivienne's grandmother had made it abundantly clear when Vivienne had left that she was disgusted with her; that Vivienne was truly orphaned, now, with no family anywhere in France. No name and no money, no ancestry to call her own. Mireille had told her that choosing Cedrick would only see her burned, and had warned that she didn't want to hear Vivienne come crying to her when everything inevitably fell apart.

You walk out that door, Vivienne, Mireille had said, and you are stricken from this family tree. My only granddaughter died with her father, I will tell everyone. Died at the hands of her worthless mother.

Vivienne pulled in a breath, let it flood her dusty lungs, and let it out as a fraying sigh. She wished she had a candle with her but it had been too much to remember, this night, when the

restlessness of insomnia had dragged her too close, too often, to the surface.

Tomorrow, she told herself, she would don the armor fully again. Tomorrow, she would keep close the lessons her grandmother had given her. Tomorrow, she would rely on that distance to return her to her rightful self. Tomorrow, she would be the person she was meant to be; the person who did not fear or question the troubled edges of her mind.

Tomorrow, she would once again be ready for war.

But tonight—tonight, even in waking, she would let herself dream.

She closed her eyes and pushed her head harder against the unfinished attic wall. Felt the stinging nettling of her hair catching in splinters and gaps.

She imagined a cake on a table, and Amy and Braeden and Cedrick standing around it. She left Riley out because she liked to forget he existed, but Aiden could be there instead. She imagined a candle, flickering and bright, casting shadows away from Amy's smile, lending warmth back into rigor mortis; life back into death.

She waited until they were firm in her mind, and then into that clustered dusk she sang a song of birthday wishes.

“Bon anniversaire, nos vœux les plus sincères. Que ces quelques fleurs, vous apportent le bonheur... Que l'année entière, vous soit douce et légère. Et que l'an fini, nous soyons tous réunis. Pour chanter en chœur... Bon anniversaire...”

The words drifted into the dark; a distant, low-breath melody that could hold no truth against reality; no buoyancy in the shadowy depths.

There would be no other years; no happiness waiting, nor flowers to come. There was no one to sing along with her, because she did not want to hurt the only person who would have remembered.

So she stayed alone in the attic, wishing she could be surrounded by the ghosts of the family who had believed in her.

But they were gone forever.

Fading memories of a time she would give anything to regain, yet her 'anything' would never be enough.

Let go.

As always, she had to let go.

“Adieu, maman,” she whispered.

When she stood, already she felt the armor pulling back into place.

When she opened the trapdoor that led back down to the house, she felt reality flooding back, bringing with it a sense of certainty she felt for most of her life but allowed herself to lose, just a little, when she was up here alone in the dark.

When she reached up and pulled the switch on the light, she imagined Amy blowing out that candle and fading, like everything else, back into the black.

It would be another year until Vivienne would let herself feel that vulnerability again.

Another year until she breathed doubt into the dark; whispering confessions and questions to a mother long dead.

Eight

Thursday July 21, 2005

Carlisle Windsor School, All Saints neighborhood

Lexington, PA

When they pushed him, Boyd stumbled and fell. He had been paying so much attention to the book he hadn't expected anything else, so he wasn't prepared to catch himself. His foot missed the edge of the steps and he tumbled all the way down the stairs, bumping and rolling until he crashed to an abrupt halt at the bottom.

His knees skinned on the concrete, and his arms jolted. His head snapped forward.

It hurt.

The suddenness scared him. His heart thundered in his chest.

He curled his fingers against the concrete and focused on that instead of the startled pain that tried to overcome his natural ability to stay unaffected. His chin wobbled so he clenched his teeth.

He wouldn't cry. Boys didn't cry, and he couldn't be a girl. They already called him that and more.

Carefully, he pushed himself up. It hurt even more doing that, and for a horrifying second he thought he was going to cry anyway. Everything got all blurry the way it did when he had tears. But he managed to hold it in, and he thought his mother and dad would have both been proud.

He could stay quiet no matter what. He was a good boy.

As long as he stayed a good boy, his mother and dad would always remember him. They would still want him.

As long as he stayed a good boy, Mr. Cole wouldn't take them away.

"You forgot this."

The book he'd dropped careened down and clipped him in the side. It hurt but he tried to ignore it. He stayed very still, hunched and facing away from the others, in the hopes that they would forget he existed the way most people did.

He didn't understand why they pushed him today. Usually they went out of their way to do nothing that could leave physical marks. Usually, they used their words the most as weapons.

He didn't know why Austin was mad today, but Austin was always mad lately. Boyd had overheard Nella say that it was because Austin's mom finally died of the lung sickness. Austin had always hated Boyd, but now he wouldn't leave him alone. Every time Boyd turned a corner and Austin was there, he did or said something mean. He kept telling Boyd to run home crying to his mommy, and then he said if Boyd did, he would have his dad's people follow Boyd home and kill his mom so he had a real reason to cry.

Boyd didn't know why Austin was so obsessed with the idea of him crying. He hadn't cried in

front of Austin except the first time, when he hadn't expected Austin to try to set his shirt on fire while he was wearing it, and he'd gotten scared.

But that was before Lou had protected Boyd. Before Lou stopped Austin from doing more than taunting him from afar.

But now Lou wasn't there. It was summer and only some of the kids attended the summer academy. Austin and his friends went because they weren't good students and they got in trouble a lot, even though their parents always bailed them out. Boyd was a top student but his parents were busy a lot so Boyd went so they didn't have to get a babysitter and Boyd got to learn more.

Lou had wanted Boyd to go with the Krauszer family on his vacation but Boyd couldn't and hadn't wanted to, anyway. Austin already said mean things about Lou because he spent time with Boyd. If Boyd went with them in the summer it would only be worse.

Plus, even though his dad said he didn't have to go to the summer academy, Boyd liked learning. He liked that they let him do art when it was quiet. He didn't have to worry as much about making a mess here; they didn't give him a look the way his mother did at home. He felt less guilty here.

But with Lou gone and fewer people to care, Austin and his friends were getting worse by the day. With Austin leading them, they taunted Boyd, called him names, stole his money, hid his backpack, took his food, blocked him from his desk, pulled his hair, his clothes, tripped him...

And now, they pushed Boyd down the stairs when Boyd was reading a book as he walked.

He heard Austin laugh from the top of the stairs. "Why're you so clumsy, Boyd?"

"He's even creepier when no one else is around," Christian said. "Doesn't even look where he's going."

"He doesn't even walk down stairs like normal," Elijah said.

Boyd stayed quiet, controlling his breath and not moving. Austin would get bored eventually. He always got bored.

"Stupid! I can see you! Just 'cause you're not moving..."

Boyd heard footsteps stomping down the steps and suddenly he was worried. Austin was supposed to leave him alone if he didn't do anything.

People always left him alone if he stayed quiet enough. They got tired of hurting or hating him if he didn't resist.

He chanced a glance over his shoulder and saw Austin storming toward him, face red and twisted in a scowl, while Elijah and Christian flanked him.

If Lou were there, he would have run in between them and punched Austin in the face. He would have gotten in a fight and yelled at them for hurting Boyd.

But Lou was gone and Boyd didn't want to hurt anyone, he just wanted to be left alone.

He grabbed the book and his backpack from where it had fallen next to him. He started to run, or tried to, but his knee hurt and he was a lot smaller than them.

He was smaller than all of the other boys. Austin and the others always said it was because he

was a girl. They said they should cut off his privates and then he'd really be a girl, and then they usually laughed and tried to pull at his clothing.

He didn't like it when they did that. He didn't like it when people touched him, except Lou and his dad who were always nice and didn't say mean things around him like he didn't know what it meant.

He barely made it past the fountain before Austin caught up to him.

"Where do you think you're going?" Austin demanded, and behind him Elijah echoed, "Yeah, where're you going?"

Boyd didn't speak. He knew it was better if he didn't speak. It was always better if he was quiet, even when he was home.

Austin and Elijah yanked him back by the arms, and Boyd didn't resist because he knew it was safer if he didn't. They dragged him backward, his heels bumping along the ground. The book and his backpack fell with a thud.

"You were staring in class earlier." Austin glared at Boyd. "Staring at Christian. Why's that? You like him?"

He shoved Boyd at Christian, who jumped out of the way.

"Gross!" Christian yelled.

Boyd fell down.

"Oh, sorry." Austin sneered. "Looks like Christian doesn't like you."

The reason Boyd had been watching Christian was because he'd been trying to figure out why everyone liked him so much when he didn't really do anything nice or interesting. When all the kids were there, Christian was even more popular than Austin or Elijah, but all Christian ever did was follow Austin around. Christian wasn't good at listening to the teacher and he was always mean to Boyd.

So, why did people like him? Why did the teachers always let him get away with everything, when if Boyd tried the same thing he got cold stares instead?

Boyd had been wondering what he could do to be liked too, or at least be ignored so no one would hurt him. He'd thought if he analyzed Christian's behavior he could figure it out, and he'd thought summer was a good time because fewer people were there to notice.

But he must have been too obvious. He'd made a mistake.

Austin shoved Boyd down with a foot on his shoulder. Boyd caught himself with his hands and saw Christian's dirty loafers loom in front of his face.

"You like him so much, why don't you kiss his feet?"

Christian made a gagging noise but didn't move. Elijah laughed and, when Boyd didn't do anything, shoved hard on his back. Boyd fell forward, bumping his nose on the toe of Christian's shoe.

"Gross!" Christian shouted. "He did it! He really did it!"

Boyd didn't bother telling them he hadn't. They wouldn't believe him, anyway.

It got quiet above him and that made Boyd grow worried. He froze and, slowly, chanced a

glance up.

Austin had reddened from anger. “Gross! You’re so gross! You’re disgusting!”

Lips peeling back from his teeth, Austin grabbed a handful of Boyd’s hair, right down to the roots, making Boyd’s head throb painfully.

“I hate you,” Austin seethed.

He dragged Boyd up, getting Elijah’s help when Boyd was too heavy. When Boyd wavered to a stand, Austin shoved him hard in the chest. Boyd stumbled backward, falling on his butt. Elijah and Austin were there again, dragging him back up by the hair. Again, again they did this, pushing harder and farther each time.

The pain on Boyd’s head intensified. He sucked in a breath and barely kept himself from crying out, but he couldn’t stop his hands from grasping at Austin’s wrists to lessen the hold.

“Don’t touch me!” Austin smacked Boyd’s hands away, then threw him backward.

Boyd felt his knees catch against the edge of the fountain, and the next thing he knew he fell backward underwater. Boyd’s breath left him in a whoosh, his feet flying up into the air where he couldn’t get a good hold. Austin’s rippled reflection came over him through the water, his glare turning even scarier with the water twisting it even worse. Boyd tried to sit up out of the water but Austin got even angrier, and just as Boyd almost got to air Austin shoved him backward on the chest again.

“You stupid—disgusting—”

Austin’s words were cut in pieces as Boyd struggled to rise up and breathe; as the sound of the water engulfing him and the drone of his blood muffled Austin’s snarl. Even so, because Boyd had heard it so many times, he knew exactly what was being said to him.

Why should you get to have a mom still? Why should you get to be here? You don’t even have money. Not like the rest of us do. You don’t deserve to be here. Your dad’s poor and worthless and no one likes your mom. No one likes you, either. You’re gross. You’re gay. You’re creepy. You’re stupid. You’re a girl. You’re a spy, just like your dirty traitor mom. You don’t belong in this country. Everyone hates you. We all wish you’d die.

Water rushed into Boyd’s mouth when he couldn’t hold his breath any longer. He choked, trying to cough while trying to breathe, his breath filling with water instead. He grabbed blindly at Austin’s wrists, trying frantically to pull them away from him, and Austin only pressed down harder.

He was terrified and powerless and his heart hammered so hard he couldn’t even make out what else Austin was saying. All he knew was he couldn’t breathe and maybe Austin, Elijah and Christian glaring down at him through the water was the last thing he would see. Maybe Austin really would kill him and maybe that really was what everyone wanted.

He didn’t know if some of the wetness on his face was tears too.

He hoped not. He was a good boy, and boys didn’t cry.

Distantly, just as his mind buzzed so hard he couldn’t think, he saw Christian and Elijah look suddenly to the side. Austin scowled. Just as abruptly, the pressure on his chest was gone and Boyd rose up out of the water with a great gasp of air that caught and burned and hurt deep in his chest. He choked and coughed and crumpled forward, trying to catch his breath. It took him a long, shaky moment to be able to scramble out of the water and collapse against the side of the fountain just

trying to breathe. The stone burned against his arm, hot from the summer air.

There was a sharp punch to his side.

“You better tell her it was fun or I’ll get my dad’s people to kill your dad, too,” Austin hissed. “And then they’ll kill Lou and make you watch. And then *I’ll* be the one to kill *you* just like you deserve.”

Boyd barely had the chance to look up at Austin’s narrowed eyes before he recognized the sharp click of heels on pavement. He struggled to push himself to a stand, and had only just managed it before Ms. Riggs was upon them.

“What is the meaning of this? Austin Cole, are you bothering Boyd?”

Austin was all wide-eyed innocence looking up at her. “No, Ms. Riggs. We were playing a game. Loser had to look for the pennies at the bottom of the fountain. Boyd’s bad at the game so he lost and then he didn’t find any pennies. We tried to help him but he really sucks at it.”

Ms. Riggs stared at him like she didn’t believe him, and Boyd didn’t blame her. Austin could have come up with a better story. Boyd’s dad would have. He was good at stories.

“Is that true, Boyd?” she asked.

Boyd had learned long ago that adults didn’t care about the truth; they only wanted to hear what made them happy. His dad was the only exception, but the problem was unlike everyone else, his dad *did* care, and then he got upset anyway because he worried. Everyone else hated him if he said or did something that made their lives difficult. Even the other kids. Except for Lou, and Lou wasn’t here.

So, Boyd nodded.

She frowned, glanced between them, and then as she always did when she was confronted with anything that seemed like too much trouble, she shrugged and accepted it. She was always doing that with the kids in school.

Boyd had overheard her talking to one of the other teachers the other day. She was mad about how she needed more money and had to work extra in the summer academy. She said when she’d first started as a teacher that she’d wanted to make a difference but then she’d realized how spoiled all the kids were here. She said she’d been yelled at by the parents for teaching their kids the wrong things but then also not teaching them enough; for not disciplining the kids and acting like their parents but then if the kids were disciplined they said she *wasn’t* their parents and she didn’t have the right. She told the teacher she found it hard to care anymore. She said sometimes she thought the kids deserved anything they got, since they were all rich enough that they probably missed most of the problems of the war.

Teach them a lesson, Ms. Riggs had said. They deserve it.

Boyd didn’t know what money had to do with loss and the war. All he knew was for Ms. Riggs his family had too much, and for Austin his family didn’t have enough, and even at home he often was too much or not enough of everything.

Ms. Riggs shook her head to herself, muttered something about them being more careful, and left. They watched her cross Carlisle Windsor’s courtyard, walk up the steps Boyd had fallen down, and return to the nearby school building.

Austin didn't even wait for the door to shut behind her before he kned Boyd in the groin. Pain flooded Boyd like water had his lungs. He fell down to his hands and knees with a gasp.

"Ohh?" Austin looked down his nose at Boyd. "That hurts girls too?"

Elijah laughed. "He's got 'boy' in his name but he's weaker than a girl."

"If he *was* a girl it'd be less creepy that he keeps looking at me." Christian shoved Boyd on the side with his foot. "Don't look at me again! I don't want to see your ugly eyes! They're creepy. Only gross people have yellow eyes."

"Yeah, stop looking at Christian," Elijah echoed. He shoved his foot against Boyd's hip. "He hates you."

"We all do." Austin spit on the back of Boyd's head. "Next time, I'll kill you for good. I bet the teachers'd give me straight A's for doing it, too. You saw Ms. Riggs. She'd probably help if she could. She doesn't like you, either."

"Only Lou likes him," Elijah said.

"That's 'cause Lou's gay too." Christian sneered but Elijah laughed, and Austin snorted.

"Let's go," Christian said. "We're gonna get infected if we stay around him too long."

Elijah jumped back in alarm. "Infected? With what?"

"I dunno. But my brother says it happens all the time with gays. They get you sick if they touch you."

"Why didn't you say that before I touched him?" Elijah demanded heatedly.

"It's fine 'cause you used your foot and didn't touch his skin. As long as you use your shoe you're okay."

"But I touched his hair—"

"I think it has to be bare skin or something, I dunno." Christian turned and shoved his hands in his pockets. "We should be okay. Austin probably got it washed off in the water."

"We better be," Elijah grumbled.

"But don't ever let him touch you normally! Throw things at him if you have to so he stays away. We gotta tell the others when they come back. They'll get sick if we don't."

"We'll tell Mary when school starts. She'll get it to everyone."

"Oh yeah," Christian said thoughtfully. "Mary will."

Austin knelt next to Boyd and hissed into his ear, "Just die already," before shoving his head down to the concrete with a hand in his hair. Boyd's cheek scratched along the rough ground.

Austin stood up and stormed up to his friends. "Let's go. I got a new game at home we can play."

Elijah leaped into the air with his hands raised, a huge grin on his face. "Yessss! Your dad got it for you?"

Austin scoffed as they strode away. "Idiot. My dad gets me anything I want."

They left in the same direction Ms. Riggs had, but they kept going past the buildings, toward the front gates hidden from view from here.

It seemed so quiet and empty with them gone.

Even after they had left, Boyd stayed on the ground, trying to stabilize his breathing and working up his pain tolerance to pretend nothing hurt. He didn't know how long it took, but eventually he was able to stand up, and he didn't fall when he got his backpack and book, so he knew he would be okay.

He was pleased with himself for this. He was a good boy.

Slowly, he started home. The longer he walked, the more he realized he had twisted his knee a little when falling down the stairs. It hurt and it made him limp a little, but he had to walk. Austin had already taken the money he'd had earlier, so he couldn't get on the bus or take the train. His mother didn't like it when he took the train or bus, anyway. She said it was pleveein. He didn't know what that was, but he knew it was as bad as being a girl and gay.

He still didn't know what 'gay' meant, but he knew it was something really bad. It had to be, since so many people called him it. And they called Lou it too, when they wanted to hurt him the way they hurt Boyd.

By the time he made it home, his knee hurt so much it stung with every step. He had hoped he would be home early enough that no one else would be there but he saw his mother's car in the driveway. Maybe she wouldn't be downstairs.

He opened the front door quietly and peered around the heavy wooden door but his stealth hadn't worked. He saw his mother reclining on the couch, holding a glass of something pale and not for kids that she called white wine.

Her gaze turned to him at the sound.

Austin's words passed through his mind. *They all wish you'd die.*

Sometimes he thought his mother felt the same.

"What did you do?"

Her tone was detached, no anger in it, but Boyd still felt ashamed for having disappointed her. He stared at her wordlessly, not knowing how to respond. He didn't know what he'd done to make Austin angry today. Maybe if he did, he would know what not to do tomorrow.

"You walked home looking like this? In front of the neighbors?"

He continued to stare wide-eyed, not knowing what answer to give to make her happy. In the end, he didn't have long to wait before she turned away from him.

"You know where the first aid kit is."

Boyd did. His mother always made sure it was well-stocked for him. He thought that was very kind of her and showed that she cared. If he wasn't a good boy she would stop stocking it, he thought. So he had to make sure he stayed good.

He limped into the bathroom and carefully pulled the first aid kit out of the cupboard, trying to ignore the way his back twinged when he lifted his arms at the wrong angle, and how his knee trembled with his weight. He selected the right size of band-aids and placed them on as carefully as he

could.

He didn't have many injuries, luckily. And his clothes and hair had dried on his way home. So everything was okay.

Once his scrapes and cuts were covered, he put the first aid kit away and then went into his room where he changed. He carried his dirty clothes over to the hamper in the bathroom, and then realized he was still dirty and a bit of blood had smeared. He tried to reach for the faucet but it was too hard to reach with his stretched limbs. He started to force it, but something startlingly painful pulled at his knee, and he lost his balance. He fell down with a muffled thump.

He hit his butt on the floor and told himself he didn't want to cry at how much that had hurt.

He was a boy and boys didn't cry.

He was okay. Everything was fine.

He was just about to push himself back up to a stand when he noticed movement in the doorway and he froze, looking over.

He shouldn't have made a noise. Now she was angry with him for interrupting her, he knew it.

His fears seemed confirmed when he saw the way she watched him. At first she only stood there, and he thought she seemed more disappointed the longer it lasted.

She said quietly, "You cannot do anything right, can you?"

She walked to the sink while he watched half curiously and half in trepidation. Soon, she was kneeling next to him with a soapy, wet cloth in one hand, and a fluffy towel folded on her lap. She wiped at the blood and dirt caked all over him, not meeting his eyes, nor touching him other than through the cloth as she cleaned him.

Neither of them spoke.

When she was done, she pulled a band-aid off that hadn't covered the knee wound well enough. She pulled the first aid kit out again, and then set a small amount of some sort of cloth with holes in it over the wound and taped it on with the odd tape Boyd had never figured out how to use. When finished, she put everything away again, and rinsed the cloth out in the sink before setting it in the hamper.

She ran a clinical eye over Boyd, and then turned and walked out of the bathroom. Boyd stood up and inspected her handiwork. The holey-cloth was much better. The band-aid had hurt the way he'd had it on; too small for the wound and unable to stick to the blood.

He walked out of the bathroom and peered down the hall to find her sitting once more on the couch, sipping a glass of white wine and staring blankly out the window. He thought about thanking her for her help but he knew that the best way to thank her was to be very quiet so he didn't upset her.

Boyd went to his room, where he dug around in his nightstand drawer until, with a thrill in his heart and a flutter in his stomach, he found what he was looking for. He smiled when he pulled it out, feeling warm inside and very important the way he did every time he touched the little metal notebook and pen. It was brown and blue and it was his very own gift someone gave him.

Julian had given it to him to keep, even though Boyd didn't know why. Maybe Boyd had been

an especially good boy that day and Julian had known it. Boyd's dad said Julian was smart and knew a lot of things so maybe Julian had known that Austin had been gone that day but even with that everyone had still ignored Boyd and acted like they hated him, and Christian and Elijah had still glared. Maybe Julian had known that Boyd had felt sad, and he'd given him something so important like this notebook because he was nice.

Boyd was very gentle with the notebook, as he always was when he touched it. He didn't want Julian to think he wasn't careful with important presents.

With aching slowness, he settled down onto the floor between his bed and his bookshelf, across the room from the door. It was his favorite place to be, because it hid him from the doorway and the rest of the house. He could be super special invisible back here, and then it wouldn't bother him even when his mother and dad forgot he existed, because anyone would forget someone who was hidden like this.

It made him feel like if they ever forgot about him it wasn't because he was bad or they didn't want him, but instead was because they simply couldn't see him.

He turned the notebook around in his hands, enjoying the process of pulling the pen out from its sheath, and then he opened the pad to a new page. Sometimes he pretended he was his dad, taking notes for very important stories or articles that would change the world the way his dad was always saying he wanted to do.

But most of the time, he drew.

He stared at the blank page for a few seconds, getting a feel for what he wanted to draw. An image started to form in his mind, and with a pleased nod he set the pen to paper.

It was going to be a frog.

AUTHOR NOTE, February 3, 2018

The story that Julian Files tells is nowhere near complete but this is the point at which I stopped writing/editing stuff I'd written previously. The book is not finished. As I continue working on it (very slowly) there will not only be many more chapters that come after this point of the story, but I will probably add some in between the chapters already included/written in this document.

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Despite the story/book being totally unfinished, this was compiled into a pdf at the request of an anon on tumblr :)

As an apology for not having more story, on the next page I've included a terrible Paint comic I drew today, about the scene where Cedrick is amused by Vivienne and Boyd's twin looks. You can also find this on my tumblr page under the Ais' Terrible Art tag. Enjoy!



Julian Files
Chapter 5

Dis 2/3/18