

# hush, hush

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## PROLOGUE



LOIRE VALLEY, FRANCE  
NOVEMBER 1565

**C**HAUNCEY WAS WITH A FARMER'S DAUGHTER ON the grassy banks of the Loire River when the storm rolled in, and having let his gelding wander in the meadow, was left to his own two feet to carry him back to the château. He tore a silver buckle off his shoe, placed it in the girl's palm, and watched her scurry away, mud slinging on her skirts. Then he tugged on his boots and started for home.

Rain sheeted down on the darkening countryside surrounding

the Château de Langeais. Chauncey stepped easily over the sunken graves and humus of the cemetery; even in the thickest fog he could find his way home from here and not fear getting lost. There was no fog tonight, but the darkness and onslaught of rain were deceiving enough.

There was movement along the fringe of Chauncey's vision, and he snapped his head to the left. At first glance what appeared to be a large angel topping a nearby monument rose to full height. Neither stone nor marble, the boy had arms and legs. His torso was naked, his feet were bare, and peasant trousers hung low on his waist. He hopped down from the monument, the ends of his black hair dripping rain. It slid down his face, which was dark as a Spaniard's.

Chauncey's hand crept to the hilt of his sword. "Who goes there?"

The boy's mouth hinted at a smile.

"Do not play games with the Duc de Langeais," Chauncey warned. "I asked for your name. Give it."

"Duc?" The boy leaned against a twisted willow tree. "Or bastard?"

Chauncey unsheathed his sword. "Take it back! My father was the Duc de Langeais. I'm the Duc de Langeais now," he added clumsily, and cursed himself for it.

The boy gave a lazy shake of his head. "Your father wasn't the old duc."

Chauncey seethed at the outrageous insult. "And your father?"

he demanded, extending the sword. He didn't yet know all his vassals, but he was learning. He would brand the family name of this boy to memory. "I'll ask once more," he said in a low voice, wiping a hand down his face to clear away the rain. "Who are you?"

The boy walked up and pushed the blade aside. He suddenly looked older than Chauncey had presumed, maybe even a year or two older than Chauncey. "One of the Devil's brood," he answered.

Chauncey felt a clench of fear in his stomach. "You're a raving lunatic," he said through his teeth. "Get out of my way."

The ground beneath Chauncey tilted. Bursts of gold and red popped behind his eyes. Hunched with his fingernails grinding into his thighs, he looked up at the boy, blinking and gasping, trying to make sense of what was happening. His mind reeled like it was no longer his to command.

The boy crouched to level their eyes. "Listen carefully. I need something from you. I won't leave until I have it. Do you understand?"

Gritting his teeth, Chauncey shook his head to express his disbelief—his defiance. He tried to spit at the boy, but it trickled down his chin, his tongue refusing to obey him.

The boy clasped his hands around Chauncey's; their heat scorched him and he cried out.

"I need your oath of fealty," the boy said. "Bend on one knee and swear it."

Chauncey commanded his throat to laugh harshly, but his

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throat constricted and he choked on the sound. His right knee buckled as if kicked from behind, though no one was there, and he stumbled forward into the mud. He bent sideways and retched.

“Swear it,” the boy repeated.

Heat flushed Chauncey’s neck; it took all his energy to curl his hands into two weak fists. He laughed at himself, but there was no humor. He had no idea how, but the boy was inflicting the nausea and weakness inside him. It would not lift until he took the oath. He would say what he had to, but he swore in his heart he would destroy the boy for this humiliation.

“Lord, I become your man,” Chauncey said venomously.

The boy raised Chauncey to his feet. “Meet me here at the start of the Hebrew month of Cheshvan. During the two weeks between new and full moons, I’ll need your service.”

“A . . . fortnight?” Chauncey’s whole frame trembled under the weight of his rage. “I am the Duc de Langeais!”

“You are a Nephil,” the boy said on a sliver of a smile.

Chauncey had a profane retort on the tip of his tongue, but he swallowed it. His next words were spoken with icy venom. “What did you say?”

“You belong to the biblical race of Nephilim. Your real father was an angel who fell from heaven. You’re half mortal.” The boy’s dark eyes lifted, meeting Chauncey’s. “Half fallen angel.”

Chauncey’s tutor’s voice drifted up from the recesses of his mind, reading passages from the Bible, telling of a deviant race

created when angels cast from heaven mated with mortal women. A fearsome and powerful race. A chill that wasn't entirely revulsion crept through Chauncey. "Who are you?"

The boy turned, walking away, and although Chauncey wanted to go after him, he couldn't command his legs to hold his weight. Kneeling there, blinking up through the rain, he saw two thick scars on the back of the boy's naked torso. They narrowed to form an upside-down V.

"Are you—fallen?" he called out. "Your wings have been stripped, haven't they?"

The boy—angel—whoever he was did not turn back. Chauncey did not need the confirmation.

"This service I'm to provide," he shouted. "I demand to know what it is!"

The air resonated with the boy's low laughter.

CHAPTER

1

COLDWATER, MAINE  
PRESENT DAY

I WALKED INTO BIOLOGY AND MY JAW FELL OPEN. Mysteriously adhered to the chalkboard was a Barbie doll, with Ken at her side. They'd been forced to link arms and were naked except for artificial leaves placed in a few choice locations. Scribbled above their heads in thick pink chalk was the invitation:

WELCOME TO HUMAN REPRODUCTION (SEX)

At my side Vee Sky said, “This is exactly why the school outlaws camera phones. Pictures of this in the eZine would be all the evidence I’d need to get the board of education to ax biology. And then we’d have this hour to do something productive—like receive one-on-one tutoring from cute upperclass guys.”

“Why, Vee,” I said, “I could’ve sworn you’ve been looking forward to this unit all semester.”

Vee lowered her lashes and smiled wickedly. “This class isn’t going to teach me anything I don’t already know.”

“Vee? As in virgin?”

“Not so loud.” She winked just as the bell rang, sending us both to our seats, which were side by side at our shared table.

Coach McConaughy grabbed the whistle swinging from a chain around his neck and blew it. “Seats, team!” Coach considered teaching tenth-grade biology a side assignment to his job as varsity basketball coach, and we all knew it.

“It may not have occurred to you kids that sex is more than a fifteen-minute trip to the backseat of a car. It’s science. And what is science?”

“Boring,” some kid in the back of the room called out.

“The only class I’m failing,” said another.

Coach’s eyes tracked down the front row, stopping at me. “Nora?”

“The study of something,” I said.

He walked over and jabbed his index finger on the table in front of me. “What else?”

“Knowledge gained through experimentation and observation.” Lovely. I sounded like I was auditioning for the audiobook of our text.

“In your own words.”

I touched the tip of my tongue to my upper lip and tried for a synonym. “Science is an investigation.” It sounded like a question.

“Science is an investigation,” Coach said, sanding his hands together. “Science requires us to transform into spies.”

Put that way, science almost sounded fun. But I’d been in Coach’s class long enough not to get my hopes up.

“Good sleuthing takes practice,” he continued.

“So does sex,” came another back-of-the-room comment. We all bit back laughter while Coach pointed a warning finger at the offender.

“That won’t be part of tonight’s homework.” Coach turned his attention back to me. “Nora, you’ve been sitting beside Vee since the beginning of the year.” I nodded but had a bad feeling about where this was going. “Both of you are on the school eZine together.” Again I nodded. “I bet you know quite a bit about each other.”

Vee kicked my leg under our table. I knew what she was thinking. That he had no idea how much we knew about each other. And I don’t just mean the secrets we entomb in our diaries. Vee is my un-twin. She’s green-eyed, minky blond, and a few pounds over curvy. I’m a smoky-eyed brunette with volumes of curly hair that holds its own against even the best flatiron. And I’m all legs, like a

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bar stool. But there is an invisible thread that ties us together; both of us swear that tie began long before birth. Both of us swear it will continue to hold for the rest of our lives.

Coach looked out at the class. “In fact, I’ll bet each of you knows the person sitting beside you well enough. You picked the seats you did for a reason, right? Familiarity. Too bad the best sleuths avoid familiarity. It dulls the investigative instinct. Which is why, today, we’re creating a new seating chart.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but Vee beat me to it. “What the crap? It’s April. As in, it’s almost the end of the year. You can’t pull this kind of stuff now.”

Coach hinted at a smile. “I can pull this stuff clear up to the last day of the semester. And if you fail my class, you’ll be right back here next year, where I’ll be pulling this kind of stuff all over again.”

Vee scowled at him. She is famous for that scowl. It’s a look that does everything but audibly hiss. Apparently immune to it, Coach brought his whistle to his lips, and we got the idea.

“Every partner sitting on the left-hand side of the table—that’s your left—move up one seat. Those in the front row—yes, including you, Vee—move to the back.”

Vee shoved her notebook inside her backpack and ripped the zipper shut. I bit my lip and waved a small farewell. Then I turned slightly, checking out the room behind me. I knew the names of all my classmates . . . except one. The transfer. Coach never called

on him, and he seemed to prefer it that way. He sat slouched one table back, cool black eyes holding a steady gaze forward. Just like always. I didn't for one moment believe he just sat there, day after day, staring into space. He was thinking something, but instinct told me I probably didn't want to know what.

He set his bio text down on the table and slid into Vee's old chair.

I smiled. "Hi. I'm Nora."

His black eyes sliced into me, and the corners of his mouth tilted up. My heart fumbled a beat and in that pause, a feeling of gloomy darkness seemed to slide like a shadow over me. It vanished in an instant, but I was still staring at him. His smile wasn't friendly. It was a smile that spelled trouble. With a promise.

I focused on the chalkboard. Barbie and Ken stared back with strangely cheerful smiles.

Coach said, "Human reproduction can be a sticky subject—"

"Ewww!" groaned a chorus of students.

"It requires mature handling. And like all science, the best approach is to learn by sleuthing. For the rest of class, practice this technique by finding out as much as you can about your new partner. Tomorrow, bring a write-up of your discoveries, and believe me, I'm going to check for authenticity. This is biology, not English, so don't even think about fictionalizing your answers. I want to see real interaction and teamwork." There was an implied Or else.

I sat perfectly still. The ball was in his court—I'd smiled, and

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look how well that turned out. I wrinkled my nose, trying to figure out what he smelled like. Not cigarettes. Something richer, fouler.

Cigars.

I found the clock on the wall and tapped my pencil in time to the second hand. I planted my elbow on the table and propped my chin on my fist. I blew out a sigh.

Great. At this rate I would fail.

I had my eyes pinned forward, but I heard the soft glide of his pen. He was writing, and I wanted to know what. Ten minutes of sitting together didn't qualify him to make any assumptions about me. Flitting a look sideways, I saw that his paper was several lines deep and growing.

"What are you writing?" I asked.

"And she speaks English," he said while scrawling it down, each stroke of his hand both smooth and lazy at once.

I leaned as close to him as I dared, trying to read what else he'd written, but he folded the paper in half, concealing the list.

"What did you write?" I demanded.

He reached for my unused paper, sliding it across the table toward him. He crumpled it into a ball. Before I could protest, he tossed it at the trash can beside Coach's desk. The shot dropped in.

I stared at the trash can a moment, locked between disbelief and anger. Then I flipped open my notebook to a clean page. "What is your name?" I asked, pencil poised to write.

I glanced up in time to catch another dark grin. This one

seemed to dare me to pry anything out of him.

“Your name?” I repeated, hoping it was my imagination that my voice faltered.

“Call me Patch. I mean it. *Call me.*”

He winked when he said it, and I was pretty sure he was making fun of me.

“What do you do in your leisure time?” I asked.

“I don’t have free time.”

“I’m assuming this assignment is graded, so do me a favor?”

He leaned back in his seat, folding his arms behind his head.

“What kind of favor?”

I was pretty sure it was an innuendo, and I grappled for a way to change the subject.

“Free time,” he repeated thoughtfully. “I take pictures.”

I printed *Photography* on my paper.

“I wasn’t finished,” he said. “I’ve got quite a collection going of an eZine columnist who believes there’s truth in eating organic, who writes poetry in secret, and who shudders at the thought of having to choose between Stanford, Yale, and . . . what’s that big one with the H?”

I stared at him a moment, shaken by how *dead on* he was. I didn’t get the feeling it was a lucky guess. He *knew*. And I wanted to know how—right now.

“But you won’t end up going to any of them.”

“I won’t?” I asked without thinking.

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He hooked his fingers under the seat of my chair, dragging me closer to him. Not sure if I should scoot away and show fear, or do nothing and feign boredom, I chose the latter.

He said, “Even though you’d thrive at all three schools, you scorn them for being a cliché of achievement. Passing judgment is your third biggest weakness.”

“And my second?” I said with quiet rage. Who was this guy? Was this some kind of disturbing joke?

“You don’t know how to trust. I take that back. You trust—just all the wrong people.”

“And my first?” I demanded.

“You keep life on a short leash.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re scared of what you can’t control.”

The hair at the nape of my neck stood on end, and the temperature in the room seemed to chill. Ordinarily I would have gone straight to Coach’s desk and requested a new seating chart. But I refused to let Patch think he could intimidate or scare me. I felt an irrational need to defend myself and decided right then and there I wouldn’t back down until he did.

“Do you sleep naked?” he asked.

My mouth threatened to drop, but I held it in check. “You’re hardly the person I’d tell.”

“Ever been to a shrink?”

“No,” I lied. The truth was, I was in counseling with the school

psychologist, Dr. Hendrickson. It wasn't by choice, and it wasn't something I liked to talk about.

"Done anything illegal?"

"No." Occasionally breaking the speed limit wouldn't count. Not with him. "Why don't you ask me something normal? Like . . . my favorite kind of music?"

"I'm not going to ask what I can guess."

"You do not know the type of music I listen to."

"Baroque. With you, it's all about order, control. I bet you play . . . the cello?" He said it like he'd pulled the guess out of thin air.

"Wrong." Another lie, but this one sent a chill rippling along my skin that left my fingers tingling. Who was he really? If he knew I played the cello, what else did he know?

"What's that?" Patch tapped his pen against the inside of my wrist. Instinctively I pulled away.

"A birthmark."

"Looks like a scar. Are you suicidal, Nora?" His eyes connected with mine, and I could feel him laughing. "Parents married or divorced?"

"I live with my mom."

"Where's dad?"

"My dad passed away last year."

"How did he die?"

I flinched. "He was—murdered. This is kind of personal territory, if you don't mind."

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There was a count of silence and the edge in Patch's eyes seemed to soften a touch. "That must be hard." He sounded like he meant it.

The bell rang and Patch was on his feet, making his way toward the door.

"Wait," I called out. He didn't turn. "Excuse me!" He was through the door. "Patch! I didn't get anything on you."

He turned back and walked toward me. Taking my hand, he scribbled something on it before I thought to pull away.

I looked down at the seven numbers in red ink on my palm and made a fist around them. I wanted to tell him no way was his phone ringing tonight. I wanted to tell him it was his fault for taking all the time questioning me. I wanted a lot of things, but I just stood there looking like I didn't know how to open my mouth.

At last I said, "I'm busy tonight."

"So am I." He grinned and was gone.

I stood nailed to the spot, digesting what had just happened. Did he eat up all the time questioning me on purpose? So I'd fail? Did he think one flashy grin would redeem him? Yes, I thought. Yes, he did.

"I won't call!" I called after him. "Not—ever!"

"Have you finished your column for tomorrow's deadline?" It was Vee. She came up beside me, jotting notes on the notepad she carried everywhere. "I'm thinking of writing mine on the injustice of seating charts. I got paired with a girl who said she just finished lice treatment this morning."

“My new partner,” I said, pointing into the hallway at the back of Patch. He had an annoyingly confident walk, the kind you find paired with faded T-shirts and a cowboy hat. Patch wore neither. He was a dark-Levi’s-dark-henley-dark-boots kind of guy.

“The senior transfer? Guess he didn’t study hard enough the first time around. Or the second.” She gave me a knowing look. “Third time’s a charm.”

“He gives me the creeps. He knew my music. Without any hints whatsoever, he said, ‘Baroque.’” I did a poor job of mimicking his low voice.

“Lucky guess?”

“He knew . . . other things.”

“Like what?”

I let go of a sigh. He knew more than I wanted to comfortably contemplate. “Like how to get under my skin,” I said at last. “I’m going to tell Coach he has to switch us back.”

“Go for it. I could use a hook for my next eZine article. ‘Tenth Grader Fights Back.’ Better yet, ‘Seating Chart Takes Slap in the Face.’ Mmm. I like it.”

At the end of the day, I was the one who took a slap in the face. Coach shot down my plea to rethink the seating chart. It appeared I was stuck with Patch.

For now.

CHAPTER

2

**M**Y MOM AND I LIVE IN A DRAFTY EIGHTEENTH-century farmhouse on the outskirts of Coldwater. It's the only house on Hawthorne Lane, and the nearest neighbors are almost a mile away. I sometimes wonder if the original builder realized that out of all the plots of land available, he chose to construct the house in the eye of a mysterious atmospheric inversion that seems to suck all the fog off Maine's coast and transplant it into our yard. The house was at this moment

veiled by gloom that resembled escaped and wandering spirits.

I spent the evening planted on a bar stool in the kitchen in the company of algebra homework and Dorothea, our housekeeper. My mom works for the Hugo Renaldi Auction Company, coordinating estate and antique auctions all along the East Coast. This week she was in Charleston, South Carolina. Her job required a lot of travel, and she paid Dorothea to cook and clean, but I was pretty sure the fine print on Dorothea's job description included keeping a watchful, parental eye on me.

"How was school?" Dorothea asked with a slight German accent. She stood at the sink, scrubbing overbaked lasagna off a casserole dish.

"I have a new biology partner."

"This is a good thing, or a bad thing?"

"Vee was my old partner."

"Humph." More vigorous scrubbing, and the flesh on Dorothea's upper arm jiggled. "A bad thing, then."

I sighed in agreement.

"Tell me about the new partner. This girl, what is she like?"

"He's tall, dark, and annoying." And eerily closed off. Patch's eyes were black orbs. Taking in everything and giving away nothing. Not that I *wanted* to know more about Patch. Since I hadn't liked what I'd seen on the surface, I doubted I'd like what was lurking deep inside.

Only, this wasn't exactly true. I'd liked a lot of what I'd seen.

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Long, lean muscles down his arms, broad but relaxed shoulders, and a smile that was part playful, part seductive. I was in an uneasy alliance with myself, trying to ignore what had started to feel irresistible.

At nine o'clock Dorothea finished for the evening and locked up on her way out. By way of a good-bye, I flashed the porch lights twice; they must have penetrated the fog, because she answered with a honk. I was alone.

I took inventory of the feelings playing out inside me. I wasn't hungry. I wasn't tired. I wasn't even all that lonely. But I was a little bit restless about my biology assignment. I'd told Patch I wouldn't call, and six hours ago I'd meant it. All I could think now was that I didn't want to fail. Biology was my toughest subject. My grade tottered problematically between A and B. In my mind, that was the difference between a full and half scholarship in my future.

I went to the kitchen and picked up the phone. I looked at what was left of the seven numbers still tattooed on my hand. Secretly, I hoped Patch didn't answer my call. If he was unavailable or uncooperative on assignments, it was evidence I could use against him to convince Coach to undo the seating chart. Feeling hopeful, I keyed in his number.

Patch answered on the third ring. "What's up?"

In a matter-of-fact tone I said, "I'm calling to see if we can meet tonight. I know you said you're busy, but—"

“Nora.” Patch said my name like it was the punch line to a joke. “Thought you weren’t going to call. Ever.”

I hated that I was eating my words. I hated Patch for rubbing it in. I hated Coach and his deranged assignments. I opened my mouth, hoping something smart would come out. “Well? Can we meet or not?”

“As it turns out, I can’t.”

“Can’t, or won’t?”

“I’m in the middle of a pool game.” I heard the smile in his voice. “An important pool game.”

From the background noise I heard on his end, I believed he was telling the truth—about the pool game. Whether it was more important than my assignment was up for debate.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“Bo’s Arcade. It’s not your kind of hangout.”

“Then let’s do the interview over the phone. I’ve got a list of questions right—”

He hung up on me.

I stared at the phone in disbelief, then ripped a clean sheet of paper from my notebook. I scribbled *Jerk* on the first line. On the line beneath it I added, *Smokes cigars. Will die of lung cancer. Hopefully soon. Excellent physical shape.*

I immediately scribbled over the last observation until it was illegible.

The microwave clock blinked to 9:05. As I saw it, I had two

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choices. Either I fabricated my interview with Patch, or I drove to Bo's Arcade. The first option might have been tempting, if I could just block out Coach's voice warning that he'd check all answers for authenticity. I didn't know enough about Patch to bluff my way through a whole interview. And the second option? Not even remotely tempting.

I delayed making a decision long enough to call my mom. Part of our agreement for her working and traveling so much was that I act responsibly and not be the kind of daughter who required constant supervision. I liked my freedom, and I didn't want to do anything to give my mom a reason to take a pay cut and get a local job to keep an eye on me.

On the fourth ring, her voice mail picked up.

"It's me," I said. "Just checking in. I've got some biology homework to finish up, then I'm going to bed. Call me at lunch tomorrow, if you want. Love you."

After I hung up, I found a quarter in the kitchen drawer. Best to leave complicated decisions to fate.

"Heads I go," I told George Washington's profile, "tails I stay." I flipped the quarter in the air, flattened it to the back of my palm, and dared a peek. My heart squeezed out an extra beat, and I told myself I wasn't sure what it meant.

"It's out of my hands now," I said.

Determined to get this over with as quickly as possible, I grabbed a map off the fridge, snagged my keys, and backed my Fiat

Spider down the driveway. The car had probably been cute in 1979, but I wasn't wild about the chocolate brown paint, the rust spreading unchecked across the back fender, or the cracked white leather seats.

Bo's Arcade turned out to be farther away than I would have liked, nestled close to the coast, a thirty-minute drive. With the map flattened to the steering wheel, I pulled the Fiat into a parking lot behind a large cinder-block building with an electric sign flashing BO'S ARCADE, MAD BLACK PAINTBALL & OZZ'S POOL HALL. Graffiti splashed the walls, and cigarette butts dotted the foundation. Clearly Bo's would be filled with future Ivy Leaguers and model citizens. I tried to keep my thoughts lofty and nonchalant, but my stomach felt a little uneasy. Double-checking that I'd locked all the doors, I headed inside.

I stood in line, waiting to get past the ropes. As the group ahead of me paid, I squeezed past, walking toward the maze of blaring sirens and blinking lights.

"Think you deserve a free ride?" hollered a smoke-roughened voice.

I swung around and blinked at the heavily tattooed cashier. I said, "I'm not here to play. I'm looking for someone."

He grunted. "You want past me, you pay." He put his palms on the counter, where a price chart had been duct-taped, showing I owed fifteen dollars. Cash only.

I didn't have cash. And if I had, I wouldn't have wasted it to

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spend a few minutes interrogating Patch about his personal life. I felt a flush of anger at the seating chart and at having to be here in the first place. I only needed to find Patch, then we could hold the interview outside. I was not going to drive all this way and leave empty-handed.

“If I’m not back in two minutes, I’ll pay the fifteen dollars,” I said. Before I could exercise better judgment or muster up a tad more patience, I did something completely out of character and ducked under the ropes. I didn’t stop there. I hurried through the arcade, keeping my eyes open for Patch. I told myself I couldn’t believe I was doing this, but I was like a rolling snowball, gaining speed and momentum. At this point I just wanted to find Patch and get out.

The cashier followed after me, shouting, “Hey!”

Certain Patch was not on the main level, I jogged downstairs, following signs to Ozz’s Pool Hall. At the bottom of the stairs, dim track lighting illuminated several poker tables, all in use. Cigar smoke almost as thick as the fog enveloping my house clouded the low ceiling. Nestled between the poker tables and the bar was a row of pool tables. Patch was stretched across the one farthest from me, attempting a difficult bank shot.

“Patch!” I called out.

Just as I spoke, he shot his pool stick, driving it into the table-top. His head whipped up. He stared at me with a mixture of surprise and curiosity.

The cashier clomped down the steps behind me, vising my shoulder with his hand. "Upstairs. Now."

Patch's mouth moved into another barely-there smile. Hard to say if it was mocking or friendly. "She's with me."

This seemed to hold some sway with the cashier, who loosened his grip. Before he could change his mind, I shook off his hand and weaved through the tables toward Patch. I took the first several steps in stride, but found my confidence slipping the closer I got to him.

I was immediately aware of something different about him. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but I could feel it like electricity. More animosity?

More confidence.

More freedom to be himself. And those black eyes were getting to me. They were like magnets clinging to my every move. I swallowed discreetly and tried to ignore the queasy tap dance in my stomach. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but something about Patch wasn't right. Something about him wasn't normal. Something wasn't . . . safe.

"Sorry about the hang-up," Patch said, coming beside me. "The reception's not great down here."

Yeah, right.

With a tilt of his head, Patch motioned the others to leave. There was an uneasy silence before anybody moved. The first guy to leave bumped into my shoulder as he walked past. I took a step

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back to balance myself and looked up just in time to receive cold eyes from the other two players as they departed.

Great. It wasn't my fault Patch was my partner.

"Eight ball?" I asked him, raising my eyebrows and trying to sound completely sure of myself, of my surroundings. Maybe he was right and Bo's wasn't my kind of place. That didn't mean I was going to bolt for the doors. "How high are the stakes?"

His smile widened. This time I was pretty sure he was mocking me. "We don't play for money."

I set my handbag on the edge of the table. "Too bad. I was going to bet everything I have against you." I held up my assignment, two lines already filled. "A few quick questions and I'm out of here."

"Jerk?" Patch read out loud, leaning on his pool stick. "Lung cancer? Is that supposed to be prophetic?"

I fanned the assignment through the air. "I'm assuming you contribute to the atmosphere. How many cigars a night? One? Two?"

"I don't smoke." He sounded sincere, but I didn't buy it.

"Mm-hmm," I said, setting the paper down between the eight ball and the solid purple. I accidentally nudged the solid purple while writing *Definitely* cigars on line three.

"You're messing up the game," Patch said, still smiling.

I caught his eye and couldn't help but match his smile—briefly. "Hopefully not in your favor. Biggest dream?" I was proud of this one because I knew it would stump him. It required forethought.

"Kiss you."

"That's not funny," I said, holding his eyes, grateful I didn't stutter.

"No, but it made you blush."

I boosted myself onto the side of the table, trying to look impassive as I did. I crossed my legs, using my knee as a writing board.

"Do you work?"

"I bus tables at the Borderline. Best Mexican in town."

"Religion?"

He didn't seem surprised by the question, but he didn't seem overjoyed by it either. "I thought you said a few quick questions. You're already at number four."

"Religion?" I asked more firmly.

Patch dragged a hand thoughtfully along the line of his jaw. "Not religion . . . cult."

"You belong to a cult?" I realized too late that while I sounded surprised, I shouldn't have.

"As it turns out, I'm in need of a healthy female sacrifice. I'd planned on luring her into trusting me first, but if you're ready now . . ."

Any smile left on my face slid away. "You're not impressing me."

"I haven't started trying yet."

I edged off the table and stood up to him. He was a full head taller. "Vee told me you're a senior. How many times have you failed tenth-grade biology? Once? Twice?"

"Vee isn't my spokesperson."

"Are you denying failing?"

hush, hush

“I’m telling you I didn’t go to school last year.” His eyes taunted me. It only made me more determined.

“You were truant?”

Patch laid his pool stick across the tabletop and crooked a finger for me to come closer. I didn’t. “A secret?” he said in confidential tones. “I’ve never gone to school before. Another secret? It’s not as dull as I expected.”

He was lying. Everyone went to school. There were laws. He was lying to get a rise out of me.

“You think I’m lying,” he said around a smile.

“You’ve never been to school, ever? If that’s true—and you’re right, I don’t think it is—what made you decide to come this year?”

“You.”

The impulse to feel scared pounded through me, but I told myself that was exactly what Patch wanted. Standing my ground, I tried to act annoyed instead. Still, it took me a moment to find my voice. “That’s not a real answer.”

He must have taken a step closer, because suddenly our bodies were separated by nothing more than a shallow margin of air. “Your eyes, Nora. Those cold, pale gray eyes are surprisingly irresistible.” He tipped his head sideways, as if to study me from a new angle. “And that killer curvy mouth.”

Startled not so much by his comment, but that part of me responded positively to it, I stepped back. “That’s it. I’m out of here.”

But as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew they weren't true. I felt the urge to say something more. Picking through the thoughts tangled in my head, I tried to find what it was I felt I had to say. Why was he so derisive, and why did he act like I'd done something to deserve it?

"You seem to know a lot about me," I said, making the understatement of the year. "More than you should. You seem to know exactly what to say to make me uncomfortable."

"You make it easy."

A spark of anger fired through me. "You admit you're doing this on purpose?"

"This?"

"This—provoking me."

"Say 'provoking' again. Your mouth looks provocative when you do."

"We're done. Finish your pool game." I grabbed his pool stick off the table and pushed it at him. He didn't take it.

"I don't like sitting beside you," I said. "I don't like being your partner. I don't like your condescending smile." My jaw twitched—something that typically happened only when I lied. I wondered if I was lying now. If I was, I wanted to kick myself. "I don't like you," I said as convincingly as I could, and thrust the stick against his chest.

"I'm glad Coach put us together," he said. I detected the slightest irony on the word "Coach," but I couldn't figure out any hidden meaning. This time he took the pool stick.

hush, hush

“I’m working to change that,” I countered.

Patch thought this was so funny his teeth showed through his smile. He reached for me, and before I could move away, he untangled something from my hair.

“Piece of paper,” he explained, flicking it to the ground. As he reached out, I noticed a marking on the inside of his wrist. At first I assumed it was a tattoo, but a second look revealed a ruddy brown, slightly raised birthmark. It was the shape of a splattered paint drop.

“That’s an unfortunate place for a birthmark,” I said, more than a little unnerved that it was so similarly positioned to my own scar.

Patch casually noticeably slid his sleeve down over his wrist. “You’d prefer it someplace more private?”

“I wouldn’t prefer it anywhere.” I wasn’t sure how this sounded and tried again. “I wouldn’t care if you didn’t have it at all.” I tried a third time. “I don’t care about your birthmark, period.”

“Any more questions?” he asked. “Comments?”

“No.”

“Then I’ll see you in bio.”

I thought about telling him he’d never see me again. But I wasn’t going to eat my words twice in one day.

Later that night a *crack!* pulled me out of sleep. With my face mashed into my pillow, I held still, all my senses on high alert. My

mom was out of town at least once a month for work, so I was used to sleeping alone, and it had been months since I'd imagined the sound of footsteps creeping down the hall toward my bedroom. The truth was, I never felt completely alone. Right after my dad was shot to death in Portland while buying my mom's birthday gift, a strange presence entered my life. Like someone was orbiting my world, watching from a distance. At first the phantom presence had crept me out, but when nothing bad came of it, my anxiety lost its edge. I started wondering if there was a cosmic purpose for the way I was feeling. Maybe my dad's spirit was close by. The thought was usually comforting, but tonight was different. The presence felt like ice on the skin.

Turning my head a fraction, I saw a shadowy form stretching across my floor. I flipped around to face the window, the gauzy shaft of moonlight the only light in the room capable of casting a shadow. But nothing was there. I squeezed my pillow against me and told myself it was a cloud passing over the moon. Or a piece of trash blowing in the wind. Still, I spent the next several minutes waiting for my pulse to calm down.

By the time I found the courage to get out of bed, the yard below my window was silent and still. The only noise came from tree branches scraping against the house, and my own heart thrumming under my skin.