

Tiffany

I awoke suddenly, gasping for air. There was nothing but darkness all around me. The instant I first took that stale breath of air I knew I wasn't in my warm bed at home. Something was digging into my back, but when I tried to roll off of it I hit a wall. I moved my hands to investigate I realized that my hands were tied together, and to my utter horror, my feet were too. What the heck was going on?

As I awkwardly moved to investigate my surroundings, I realized I was in a trunk. A spike of fear went right through me. How did I get here? I wracked my brain, trying to remember. I came up with nothing. The last thing I remembered was walking home. It's obvious to me now that I didn't make it. I snorted to myself as I realized I had probably let my guard down, dreaming about my life filled with adventure instead of hour after hour of college lectures and poring over books. *Now you've got what you wanted, Ada.*

"Heeeelp!!" I cried out, beating my hands and feet against the lid of the hood. I could feel the car's movement underneath me, fairly smooth so we must have been on a highway. "Help! Please, somebody!!" I screamed until my throat was raw.

Another spike of fear went through me as the ride suddenly got a lot more bumpy. Were we on a back road now? My breathing was ragged and against the darkness I could see spots. *No no no no no.* I couldn't pass out, not now. If I did, I might never wake up. Who knows what my kidnapper planned to do with me?

It didn't take long before the vehicle stopped, and my breath along with it.. This was it. I tried to position myself with my feet towards the lid. I could kick them when they opened it and after that... I shook my head. I could worry about that when and if I got there.

I heard footsteps outside coming nearer and tensed, knowing my moment was coming soon. The sudden light when they opened the trunk lid blinded me for a second, the person's shadow outlined. I kicked out at the person, pushing them back and onto their butt. They must not have expected that. I squirmed out of the trunk as quickly as I could, but I had only just fallen onto my hands and knees on the ground when something hard hit me in the head and I had to fight to keep conscious.

When I looked up, I saw the barrel of a pistol aimed right between my eyes, which crossed in an attempt to focus on the deadly black barrel. "Try that again and I'll shoot you. I'm sure Cedric wouldn't mind." The voice was high-pitched and definitely female, but there was a... brokenness to the way she acted. A giggle erupted from her lips and I realized something. This lady was insane. "He doesn't even know you're here." she whispered conspiratorially as the hand holding the gun relaxed a little and it lowered a little.

I don't think she noticed that I was so scared I felt like I might piss my pants. I was frozen in fear, like a tiny mouse out in the open that knew there was a hungry owl spiralling in the air above it.

The lady frowned. "Come on, get up. Cedric will love his new present!" A manic smile came across her face and I shuddered, wondering once again just how the heck I got into this mess.

The woman motioned impatiently for me to stand up and I did so hastily. I looked around, hoping that there would be some neighbors out but it seemed they lived out here all on their own.

The harsh jab of the gun against my back interrupted my observation and prompted me to keep moving. She quickly pushed me in the front door of a run down one-story house. It might have been cute and quaint at one point, but no one had bothered to keep the surrounding woods and weeds from creeping up on it or even thought about replacing the broken window.

The front door creaked open on rusty hinges. The smell of cigar smoke was the first thing I noticed about the house. It permeated everything. "Oh Ceeedriiic, we're hooooome!" The woman called out in a singsong voice as she locked the door behind her. I swallowed, trying to steel my nerves for whatever was to come next.

There was no answer and the woman's smile faded. "Cedric!" She yelled. "Get in here!" Her sudden and extreme mood swings were so unpredictable and I found myself silently yelling at Cedric to get in here, if only to distract this unstable woman and the gun she held in her hand away from me.

Thankfully, a sleepy eyed boy shuffled in dressed in just pajama pants and rubbing his eyes. Those eyes widened when they saw me and I noticed that they were startlingly green. His jaw dropped open in surprise and some other emotion I couldn't identify.

"Cedric, close your mouth. We have a guest." She snapped at him, annoyed. His mouth immediately snapped shut. Well, nice to know she wasn't just bipolar towards me. Pleased, his mother went from annoyed to watchful. Her eyes flicked from Cedric to me and back again. "Well?"

The look on Cedric's face was horror, I realized suddenly. It seemed like his mother recognized it as well. "You don't like her?" She asked casually, but the way she said it sent a chill down my spine. Like I was a toy she'd brought home for her precious baby boy and could be thrown away at any moment.

Cedric immediately broke out in a smile. "No, Mom, I'm just surprised." His smile seemed too tight in his cheeks and didn't reach his eyes, but his mother didn't notice. She grinned and I relaxed slightly, feeling like I'd just barely dodged a bullet.

She set the gun in a drawer and locked it with one of many keys she had on a keyring. She noticed me watching her and I saw something twisted flicker behind her eyes. "Wow, Mom, I'm starving!" Cedric exclaimed, drawing her attention from me once again.

"Oh! Of course, it's quite late isn't it? I wasn't even here to make you dinner." She went to puttering about the kitchen, leaving me standing by the door and watching Cedric like a cornered animal.

He offered me his hand, his expression unreadable. "It's a lot easier if you do what she wants." What *she* wants? He doesn't want this? He ran his hand through his hair and I could tell it was a nervous tick. "I...I can try to explain later." He said under his breath so his mother couldn't hear.

I gulp and take his hand, nodding. What else was I supposed to do? They could do anything they wanted to me at this point, so I would just bide my time and wait for a chance to escape.

He gently tugs me towards a dining room, which isn't much more than a small table with mismatched chairs and an overhead lamp. The scent of cigars smells even stronger in here and I stifle the urge to gag, fearfully glancing toward the kitchen where Cedric's mother was cooking.

Cedric opened a cabinet and pulled out three glasses. He motioned to another cabinet. "Plates are in there. It'll make Mom happier if you help out with setting the table." He said quietly then walked to the kitchen to fill the glasses. I glanced around the dining room but there was no other doors except the one the lead back to the kitchen and no windows either. I sullenly opened the cabinet and took out three plates, but my hands were shaking so bad that I dropped one.

The shattering noise stopped the soft easy sound of puttering around in the kitchen and the woman came storming into the room while I was trying to gather up the pieces of broken porcelain. "You broke my China!" She screamed at me. I glanced down at the pieces I was collecting and noticed they definitely weren't China, but this didn't seem like a good time to contradict her. Cedric came quick behind her, grabbing her arm.

"Hey it's ok, Mom. She didn't mean to. Remember when I tried helping you set the table and I dropped a plate? I'm sure she's just not used to it." He said in a coaxing voice and some of the fury leaked from his mother's face. He'd thrown a shirt on that was still slightly wrinkled.

"But you were a toddler." She said, pouting. "She should know better."

He ignored her last remark. "I know, Mom, I know. I'll always be your baby boy." Her eyes softened even more and she looked up at him, gently cupping his cheek.

"My baby boy." She whispered, tears glistening in her eyes. I glance back down to the mess which I had gathered up completely. I felt intrusive watching them like that. His mother sounded so desperate when she'd said those three words. For what, I wasn't sure.

His mother went back to the kitchen like nothing happened and Cedric knelt down next to me. "Here I'll take that." Without waiting for my answer he takes the broken pieces and throws them into the trash.

When he came back I'd replaced the broken plate and placed the three of them on the table. He reached for my hands before I could protest and looked at my palms. There was a cut across the meaty part of my hand that I hadn't noticed before and seeing the blood ooze out of it made me nauseous. "Oh God." I looked away, knowing I'd pass out if I kept looking at it.

He led me out of the room again and I could feel his mother's eyes on my back until we entered a hallway. There were two doors on the right and one on the left. The first one on the right was a bathroom, which made me assume that the other two doors led to their bedrooms.

Cedric gently pushed down on my shoulders until I was sitting down on the toilet seat and he let the water run. I was thrown off by the contrast between Cedric and his mother. He was so calm and stable while his mother was broken glass. Ready to cut at anyone unsuspecting and changing views so easily. "I'm sorry Ada." He whispered without looking at me. I look at him, surprised. How did he know my name?

"Do I know you?" I asked, almost accusingly. It was that or he was a big-time stalker. I suppose he could have been at my college or a customer at the cafe I worked at. There were so many people, it was hard to keep track of everyone.

He nodded. "We go to the same school. We have the same lunch hour and we're both in World Studies." I nodded, tight-lipped and for some reason feel betrayed. It was one thing when I thought that his mother was just a crazy kidnapper and he...well I didn't know how he fit into it. But now, it looked like he had more connection to me than his mother. A thought hit me. Was it possible that he asked his mom to kidnap me??

Cedric still wasn't looking at me but his hands were still in the sink. "I'm sorry Ada." He said again. "I never meant for any of this to happen..." Cedric looked like he was about to say something else but his mother called that dinner was ready. "In a minute Mom!" He called back.

He took a damp cloth and gently cleaned my cut. He stuck a bandaid on my hand once it was thoroughly cleaned and suddenly leaned forward and kissed my palm. "There. All better." I looked at him, surprised. I didn't have a chance to say anything before he was leading me back out of the bathroom.

When we came back into the dining room, his mom was putting spaghetti onto the plates. Cedric took his seat on one side with his mother and I sat at the other side. I didn't think I'd feel much like eating but after tentatively taking a bite, I realized I was starving. I must have been in that trunk for a while.

Sitting at the table gave me an opportunity to observe mother and son. His mom was gaunt and sickly looking. Her hair was a mousy brown that might have been pretty if it wasn't so flat and stringy against her head. Her movements were stiff and hesitant. As I watched her hands move I noticed that her fingernails were bitten to the quick. She kept glancing at Cedric, almost

like she had to make sure he hadn't disappeared since the last time she'd seen him. He was much healthier looking than his mother. Though he shared her brown hair, it wasn't near as dirty-looking. It brushed across his forehead, almost reaching his blue eyes. He didn't share the same eyes as his mother, so I guessed that they were his father's. Watching them together was a contrast.

My eyes met with his mother's pale grey glare and I knew that observation time was over. I looked down at my plate, finishing off the last of the spaghetti. "Do you want some more?" I looked up to see Cedric looking at me. I shook my head and sipped nervously at my glass.

I helped clean up the table and put the dishes in the sink. Cedric's mother watched me with narrowed eyes. I'm not sure who she watched more, Cedric or me. He walked over and kissed his mother on the forehead. "Don't worry, we'll get the dishes. You go to bed."

She shook her head. "I'll be in the living room. There's still something that I need to do." Cedric grimaced but didn't say anything more.

He came back over to me by the sink. "Can you dry?"

"Yes, I can do that much." I snapped. He was treating me like glass and normally I hate it when people do that anyways, but it really wasn't what I expected to happen, given the situation.

He raised his eyebrow at me. "Well, I should hope so." He started washing the dishes and handing them to me. I'd dry them off and he'd tell me where they went. I hated to admit it, but we worked pretty well together. It didn't take long before the dishes were all done and I wasn't sure what to do next.

He walked to the doorway of the living room and peered in. Without the sound of running water I could hear the television. "Hey, we're going to go to bed now."

"We?" I squeaked out. I hadn't even realized it but I had moved into the doorway next to Cedric. His mother was laying on a couch. I cleared my throat. "Where am I sleeping?" I asked, afraid to know the answer.

His mother looked me dead in the eyes with contempt. "I'm not leaving you alone. Either you're sleeping with Cedric, or you're sleeping with me." I paled and chewed on my lip looking from Cedric to his mother.

"I, er, guess I'm sleeping with Cedric..." I blushed. That didn't sound the way I meant it. His mother nodded and went back to watching the show on tv, some kind of comedy.

Cedric walked back down the hallway and I followed him hesitantly. Once we were in his room, my hands were trembling and I couldn't bring myself to look at him. This was the point wasn't it? This was the reason I was here. To be his "new toy."

He reached toward me and I flinched away from his touch. He snatched his hand back like he'd been burned. "I won't touch you if you don't want me to." I still didn't look up at him, not trusting in what he said. He walked away from me and I peeked up at him. He was standing with his back to me, taking off his shirt. My face flushed and my eyes snapped down again. I heard the squeaking of the bed springs as he slipped into bed. I was still standing by the door, my hands clasped together and my heart in my throat.

"I'd give you the bed and sleep on the floor but Mom looks in during the night and she gets mad if we're not in bed together. It wouldn't be perfect." He spat out the last word like it left a bad taste in his mouth. I glanced at where he was laying in bed. It was queen sized, so there was definitely enough room for the two of us. He'd pulled back a corner of the blankets on the empty side. My side.

I slowly walked over and got into the bed, laying off the very edge, as far away as possible. I laid on my side facing him. After a few seconds I worked up the courage to say what had been on my mind. "There have been other girls."

Suddenly, it was him that couldn't stand to look at me. Cedric rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. "Yes." He answered in a coarse voice. His answer chilled me to the bone, even though I suspected.

"What happened to them?" I asked in a small voice. Did I even want to know?

He closed his eyes and his face looked pained. He was quiet so long I feared he had fallen asleep and I started nodding off too. "They died." He whispered. Just like that my eyes snapped wide open and I tensed. "I didn't realize what was happening for the longest time. They started bringing girls when I was younger, about 7 or 8. It must have been easier to convince them that this was just a big fun adventure. Kids are too trustworthy, and distracted too easily." He said bitterly.

"We thought it was a game, but whenever one displeased Mom or myself, they left. Mom always told me that they just went back home and I believed her. I believed her." His voice cracked. "I must have known deep down what was going on. Maybe not at first, but when I got older I realized that some of the girls were the same ones that I went to school with. At first I was happy, because most of the time it was Mom that decided the girls needed to go and if they were at school I could still see them away from her. It was a real shock whenever I was told that they were missing."

He shook his head. "I wish I could believe that they were still alive. Even just one." I was surprised to hear how much grief is contained in his voice. He finally looked at me with those deep blue eyes. "I promise I won't let the same happen to you." He vowed and his face was dead serious.

I couldn't help but wonder how many other girls he'd promised the same thing. I swallowed and nodded, still unable to really believe him but afraid that if I voiced my doubts, my end might come that much sooner.

"Please say something." He begged me. His blue eyes seemed to pierce right through my soul.

"I don't know what to say..." I mumbled and looked away. "It's just..." I trailed off, frustrated at my inability to explain what I was thinking. "How could you not notice? Why are you still going along with this?" My tone was accusatory.

His eyes widened and his face looked like he'd been slapped. "...what am I supposed to do? Turn my own parents in?? And then what? Everyone would blame me for something my parents were doing and I had no control over!" His voice had been raising, despite his best efforts to keep quiet. He sounded so tortured, so anguished; I couldn't help but feel sorry for the situation he'd been thrown into.

Cedric's mother opened the door and peeked inside. Her eyes immediately found me and her eyes went all narrow. "Everything alright in here?" The question was obviously aimed at Cedric, but her eyes never left me. I started to stare defiantly back at her until I remembered Cedric's words earlier: *most of the time it was Mom that decided the girls needed to go*. That just made me angrier, but I made myself look down from her like the meek little girl she wanted for her son. She was looking for a reason to get rid of me!

"We're fine, Mom. Just a lovers' spat." He gave her a shy secretive smile that didn't reach his eyes. I blushed at his choice of words. How dare he presume I would even want to touch him after what I'd learned?

She nodded and shut the door. A few seconds later, I heard a key turn in the lock of the door.

"Lovers??" I hissed under my breath.

"Yes lovers!" He hissed back at me. "If you don't start going along with this you'll make it even easier for her to come up with a reason to...get rid of you." He ran his hand through his hair in frustration. I saw something else in his face though...helplessness. I pushed away the feeling of guilt this sent through me. Even if he was trying to help me now, this should never have gotten so far.

"So...why me?" I asked quietly. I wasn't sure I'd want to know.

I watched his face redden. "Well, I really do like you and I didn't mean to even mention your name but Mom listens better than you'd think. Most of the time it's just a random girl that she finds and...observes for a while. I have to guard my words everytime I talk. Any time I mention a name, especially a girl's name, she feels the need to find out everything about that person."

I shuddered, imagining his mother stalking me. I pull the blankets closer around me, reaching for that comfort that blankets offered. It was warm and who knows how late. My eyelids were drooping but I still had so many questions.

"Does she always lock the girls with you in your room?" I asked, trying unsuccessfully to keep the sleep out of my voice.

"Yes, unless they decide to sleep with her instead. None of them ever slept more than one night with her though." He glanced at me. "Are you getting tired?"

I shook my head. "No way." I stifled a yawn. "Tell me about your mother. How was she before all this?"

Cedric looked at me, surprised. I guess none of the other girls had asked that. His eyes glazed over and he smiled reminiscently. "She used to be really pretty, not all thin and gaunt like she is now. I remember she used to bake all the time. She did everything she could to make my dad and me happy." He frowned. "Dad was never really satisfied. He wanted everything to be better. He wanted us to be better. He wanted us to be like..."

I drifted asleep to the sound of Cedric's voice.

I groaned, turning my face away from the sunlight drifting through the window. My sleep was surprisingly untroubled. I dreamt of a happy little family with a grinning blue eyed toddler. Later the dream had something to do with angels but it was so unclear and every time I tried to recall what it was about it seemed to slip farther away.

As much as I wanted to, I couldn't go back to sleep. I moved my hand to rub the sleep out of my eyes, only to realize it was pinned under something. A spike of fear went through me and my eyes snapped open.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that it was just Cedric, laying on top of my arm. He was still asleep and I was snuggled up next to him. Hmmm. Must have happened sometime in the middle of the night. He looked so peaceful and young while asleep. I hadn't realized how tormented and wary he looked when he was awake.

I could feel my arm going numb under him so I tried to wiggle it out without waking him. He groaned and rolled away from me onto his stomach, freeing my arm. He put his head on top of his now crossed arms and looked at me with his eyes still cloudy with sleep.

I bit my lip as I felt the blood rushing back into my arm. God, I always hated that pins-and-needles feeling.

"What is it?" He asked, seeing the look on my face.

I held up my arm. "Just trying to get blood back into my fingertips." He at least had the decency to look apologetic for making my arm go to sleep.

"Here." He reached out for my hand and I pulled it back.

"What are you doing? Don't touch it!" The last thing I wanted was for him to make it worse. It was already hurting to move my arm around. But I couldn't help grinning a little bit.

Cedric's returning grin was mischievous. He reached over and poked my arm, just above the elbow. Thankfully it wasn't low enough on my arm to really hurt but I swatted his hand away with my good one. "Hey!" I couldn't help giggling. I hadn't noticed it but while I was so focused on keeping my arm away from his poking finger the blood had almost returned completely in my hand and the tingly feeling was fading away. I sat up and rubbed my hand a little bit.

He was still grinning at me when he sat up too. "I've never heard you laugh before. You never did it at the college."

I shrugged. "I've always been serious about my education. School isn't a place for fun and goofing around."

He looked at me like I was crazy. "Come on, you're already old beyond your years. By the time you're finally out of school you'll realize you missed out on all the fun."

"Yeah yeah." I rolled my eyes. I'd heard that speech a dozen times. I was content reading books for fun. I spent some time out with friends, but nothing big like a party. I looked at him as I realized something. "Am I even going to be able to go back to school?" I asked quietly.

Cedric immediately sobered, his grin morphing into a grimace. "No... Mom wouldn't allow it."

I nodded. That didn't surprise me. I felt a feeling of growing horror. "What am I going to do while you're at college?" I couldn't imagine doing anything with his mother. Cedric was the only protection I had from her and even that was limited. *I might be gone when you come back.*

"Hey, hey don't talk like that." Cedric pulled me into his arms. I looked up at him, surprised. I hadn't noticed that I'd been talking out loud. "I told you I won't let anything happen to you." I nodded without looking at him. I couldn't fully believe him. Not that he'd *let* something happen to me, but how could he possibly stop his mother from getting rid of me when I wasn't here?

"Let's go get some breakfast." He let go of me and slid out of bed, throwing a shirt on. He went to the door and I was surprised to see that he opened it. He shrugged at my questioning glance. "She unlocks it when she wakes up, and Mom's never been someone who needs a lot of sleep." He said it so simply, like they were just talking about the way his mother preferred her eggs, and not the fact that she locked them up all night. That was probably what she did every night, even without a girl here. She seemed like the kind of person who would be terrified of her loved ones leaving her.

Cedric pointed to a wooden dresser on one side of the room. "There's all girls clothes in there. Plenty of different sizes so you should be able to find something that fits." He left without saying anything else and I knew what he'd left unsaid.

I sifted through the drawers, finding clothes in my size and trying very hard not to think about the girls these clothes had belonged to. My hands paused when I came across a small dress. The owner had probably been no older than 7 or 8. Tears came unbidden to my eyes and I brushed them away. This had to stop. This was *going* to stop with me, one way or another. I carefully folded the dress and put it back into the dresser.

When I walked out of the room into the hallway I heard voices. Cedric's and his mother's. They were arguing about something. With my heart beating fast, I tiptoed down the hall until I could hear better.

"Cedric, you've never objected before. I don't see why it's a problem now." His mother's voice was like that of someone trying to explain something to a small child.

"They were just girls! They didn't do anything, and they didn't deserve to be kidnapped or killed!" Cedric sounded so frustrated, and I thought I could hear a little fear in his voice as well.

"Honey, this isn't about what *they* deserved. It's about what *you* deserve. I just want the best and brightest for my boy and while you might not like this process now, you'll thank me later when you have your perfect wife and perfect family."

"Mom, we aren't perfect!" He sounded exasperated now. "Life isn't perfect! It's full of mistakes and you learn from them."

"I got rid of the mistakes." Her voice was dangerously quiet and it sent a shudder down my spine. How could she talk about all the previous girls like all they were was a simple mistake that needed to be fixed? "And we have learned from them."

"Mom—"

"No Cedric, this conversation is over." Her voice was firm and before I could take more than a few steps backwards she was in the hallway. Her suspicious eyes narrowed at me. "I think I know exactly who's been putting all these ideas in your head Cedric."

I backpedaled as fast as I could but she was surprisingly fast and there was little room in the hallway. She reached for my arm and I managed to wrench it out of her grip and run back through the open door to Cedric's room. I ran to his window, knowing she was only just behind me. My heart sunk as I saw the bars across the window and I spun around just in time to feel her slam something into my head. I crumpled to the floor, barely conscious.

"Oh yes, we certainly learn from our mistakes." Her voice sounded far away and the last thing I saw was Cedric in his doorway looking stricken with horror.

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When I woke up again, I was in a cold dark basement. The ceiling and walls were covered with strange ridges that I remembered being in the music room at my old high school. There was a strange reddish brown stain in one corner that I didn't want to think about. It looked like it was mostly just a cellar for storing food. There were a few boxes in another corner and tiny rectangular windows that looked out at ground level. I noted that they weren't barred, but they were too tiny for me to crawl out. I seemed to be alone for the moment and the only light source I had was from the light that filtered through the weeds covering the window. I could just make out some shelves and the glint of a bare light bulb in the ceiling.

I had just looked away when that light bulb flickered on, almost blinding me. I squinted against the new bright light source and turned my head to the sound of footsteps descending a flight of stairs. I dared to hope that it might be Cedric, but when his mother's form appeared I wasn't surprised. My feet were bound with rope at the ankles. I pulled on the restraints that held my hands behind my back. It felt like they had roped me to some pole.

*She, not they.* I chided myself. I had to hope that Cedric was still my way out of this. If he wasn't on my side, then I was lost and would never leave this place alive.

I tried to swallow but my throat was dry and my stomach grumbled. It was probably about noon and I hadn't had a chance to eat breakfast. Not that she was about to offer me anything anyways. Cedric's mother had a look in her eyes that terrified me. "Where's Cedric?"

"Oh, he couldn't join us now. He's feeling too compromised about you right now and besides his father came home a little after you pulled your little *stunt*." She spat the last word out.

"Oh." I frantically searched my mind for something, anything to talk about. I had to keep her talking or who knows what she might do. "What do you mean he's feeling compromised?" It was a weak question but that word seemed to stand out from her usual speech. It felt too formal, more like how someone would describe a science experiment or a mission instead of their only son.

She snorted. "He thinks he loves you. Or at the very least cares a lot about you. It seems he really admired you, unlike the others who were only strangers to him."

I cocked my head at her, surprised. He loves me? We'd barely known each other for a day. "Isn't that what you're trying to find for him? Someone to love?"

She looks at me like I had just asked why water's wet. "No." She enunciated very clearly, as if I had trouble understanding. "We are looking for the *perfect* wife for him. One that will obey him, and us. One that will be respectful and take care of him and devote all their loyalty to him. One that will give him a perfect family. You are none of these things, so you have to go." She ended her speech with a wicked smile and I saw the gleam of a knife in her hand.

"You almost ruined things earlier you know?" She giggled as she approached me. "My husband Neddy sent me a text just before he got here to get some things ready to prepare for our guest." I struggled to try and pulled my hands out of the rope but the knot was tied well. "You won't be the only one dying today. After I'm done with you, I'll go join my husband to watch the

roast outside.” Her grin was even wider and I wasn’t even trying to hide the fact that I was trying to get away. I jerked my hands against the rope, tearing my wrists open.

It was fight or flight time and flight was definitely not working. I pulled my legs back, hoping I could get a good kick at her like I had from the trunk but it seemed she was wise to the trick. She sidestepped almost lazily and stepped on my bound ankles with one foot. I tried to jerk my legs out from under her feet and met with some success when she stumbled forward and I just barely moved my head in time to avoid being stabbed in the eye. I bit her in the arm that held the knife. As long as I kept that arm from moving, I could at least prevent from getting stabbed. She started beating me in the head with her other hand but I just bit down harder, closing my eyes and ignoring the metallic tasting liquid that flooded my mouth.

“Mom!” Suddenly she was pulled off me and I spit out all the blood that had spurted into my mouth. It wasn’t until then that I realized it smelled smoky. Cedric had pulled his mother back and was coughing. “Mom...the house...it’s on fire!” He said between coughs.

She immediately forgot about me. “Your father?” She didn’t wait for Cedric to answer, instead running up the stairs and through the door. Now that it was open, I could hear the crackling of hungry flames.

Cedric picked up the knife his mother had dropped and knelt by me, cutting through the ropes that held me. “What’s going on?” I asked, gingerly moving my arms to a more comfortable position while he went to work on the rope around my ankles.

Cedric shook his head. “I’m not sure. Dad was in the living room with some guy. I was in the kitchen. All of a sudden I hear yelling and fighting. When I came back into the room...I guess the other guy had jumped out the window. A fire had started in a corner, next to a gas can. It’s spreading fast.”

He cut the rope and gave me a hand to help me stand. I shakily got to my feet but my legs gave way before I could take a step. He scooped me up in his arms like I weighed nothing more than a basket of clothes. I clutched my arms around his neck, getting the blood from my wrists all over him.

Cedric raced up the steps and we were suddenly surrounded by smoke. When I squinted through it I realized we were in the kitchen. Cedric’s mother was on her knees in the doorway to the living room, where the smoke was thickest. He crouched close to the floor, keeping us out of the worst of the smoke. He paused on the way out the front door. “Mom, we need to go.” He pleaded.

She didn’t respond at all. I coughed and hid my face in his shirt, trying to get away from the smothering smoke. “Cedric, leave her. She won’t come with us willingly and if you try to force her we’ll all die here.” I hated to sound so cold-hearted but I could tell he was torn and we didn’t have time to dawdle between choices.

He nodded and approached the door. As he was reaching for the doorknob, I remembered sitting in grade school listening to a fire fighter telling us never to touch the door knobs in a fire. “Cedric!” My warning was too late and he’d already grabbed it. I could tell by the tensing of his arm and the grimace on his face that it hurt but he didn’t let go. Instead, he turned it and pushed the door open with his shoulder. The flames had already spread outside through the window. Even though it was still sometime in the afternoon, the clouds covered enough of the sun to make it look like evening. The light from the fire through our shadows against the ground. I saw something strange in the shadow. It looked like a wing, huge on Cedric’s back. The light from the flames was flickering and my head was throbbing. I closed my eyes, there was no way that was real.

We ran away from the house—or rather, Cedric ran away with me in his arms. I greedily gulped in the fresh air. We were away from the house, but Cedric didn’t stop. He just kept walking and walking. “Cedric, where are we going?”

He paused finally, coming back to reality. When he looked down at me I saw his cheeks were shiny with tears. “Sorry, I just...” He stopped and set me down next to a tree. We were up on a hill near the house and luckily the smoke was blowing away

from us. Cedric sat down next to me with his elbows on his knees. He gazed unseeing at the burning house. "What they did was terrible. It's not like their motive for doing this was out of love for me. They just wanted their perfection. Their jealousy consumed them." He was babbling, but I didn't have the heart to tell him so. "They were doing terrible things... Mom wasn't a terrible person, not in the beginning and I was never really sure about Dad..."

Cedric turned to me with a distraught look on his face. The tears hadn't stopped. "They were terrible, so why do I regret their deaths so much?" His voice cracked and I opened my arms to him.

"Oh, Cedric." I held him while he buried his face in my shoulder. He was holding on to me like I was a lifesaver. "It's normal to mourn the death of your parents, no matter what they've done."

I watched the flames grow into the woods. "Cedric, we have to get out of here. The fire's spreading." I said gently.

He nodded and wiped his eyes. "Yeah..." He scooped me up again and I thought better of protesting. We needed to get out of here fast and if I could walk at all, it wouldn't be very fast.

It was so quiet and I wanted to distract Cedric from his melancholic thoughts. "Do you have wings?" I felt a little embarrassed asking this, since it was such a silly question.

Cedric looked down at me. "No, just one wing." He said it with all seriousness but it was still hard to believe that he wasn't joking.

"What? So you only have one wing." I asked incredulously and glanced at his back, confirming that there was nothing there.

Cedric frowned. "I told you, I'm half-angel, half-human. So only one wing. And you won't see it. Only other angels can." I gaped at him. When did he tell me this?? "Last night while you were falling asleep." He answered the question I'd been thinking. "I wasn't really sure when you fell asleep. I just know when I looked over at you to see how you'd react, you were already asleep."

I shook my head, trying to wrap my head around it. "And that's the whole reason behind the perfection thing?"

"Yup." His answer was short and clipped. I knew he didn't want to talk about his parents, not now.

"Ok." I didn't really know what to say. This was unbelievable. I was still trying to process that I'd survived a near-death experience. We lapsed into silence for a while.

All of a sudden, the woods around us ended and we were at the edge of town. Cedric gently set me on my feet. "You should try walking a little bit now that we're out of danger. It'll help loosen everything that stiffened up while you were tied up."

I nodded and we walked the rest of the way into town, with Cedric walking slowly to stay by my side. "So what now?" I asked with a feeling of trepidation. After everything that had happened and everything I'd learned, it felt strange to think about just going back to normal life. Normal was never really something I'd been interested after all. I almost feared that Cedric would decide to live somewhere else and we'd lose contact, like none of this had ever happened. He was my proof that this was real, that I wasn't just daydreaming of adventure again.

Cedric shrugged. "I don't know. Technically, no one actually owned the house. It didn't have an address, no one knew about it. Made it harder to trace anything. Even if police show up there after the fire, they won't be able to track it back to me or even my mom and dad unless there's enough left...for dental records..." I could tell this was getting hard for him to talk about.

"So where are you going to go?" I asked, trying to seem nonchalant.

He shook his head and ran his hand through his hair. "Some hotel or something I guess. I don't think I'll be able to return to the college. Dad was the one paying for that..." College. I hadn't even thought about going back. It was still too normal too register on my brain after everything that'd happened.

“Well...if you need someplace to stay...I’ve got an extra room in my apartment.” I was still trying unsuccessfully to act like I really didn’t care one way or another. Honestly, I needed someone nearby who’d went through the same things I just had. Someone who’d been there.

For the first time since his parents’ death, Cedric’s face seemed a little hopeful. “You’d really do that? I didn’t think you’d want anything to do with me after...” He trailed off, but he didn’t need to say anything more.

I nodded. “We’ll get through this...together.” I shyly offered him my hand and we walked to my apartment, ready to put the past behind us and get back into the present.