

PROLOGUE

A beacon is a warning light, a signal for safety, a balefire for wanderers, and light guiding sailors to their sanctuary. In my short seventeen years I hadn't known much of that, hadn't ever looked for a beacon in my own life, or lifted my eyes heavenward to think of my own purpose in this world.

A light, my beacon, had made his way into my life, and because of it so has the darkness. Its grip grows stronger with every breath I take, and so does my resolve. I have had to ask myself the toughest of all questions: *Who am I? What am I to become?* Totally normal questions for a girl to ask of herself, but the answers I found were the antithesis of normal.

I have always believed in making my own way, never putting too much credence into destiny, fate, or even something as simple as family traditions. Those things were all about the past. The past wouldn't tell me anything- especially since my past was dead.

And so was Orrin.

My beacon led me to a love so great it defied the boundaries of creation. I would never surrender my life, my gifts, my birthright - he taught me that. I had a purpose, a plan yet unearthed. But it wouldn't be a light or fate which would lead me to it. I would discover it- dig it out of the same ground I was cursed to live on. I will lead the way.

But as I stand here on in the wet sand, surrounded by darkness, facing my first of many temptations, I know that this city isn't my home, but merely a safe haven, a beacon along my journey.

I was brought to this city, where the Laws of Neutrality protected all souls- my heaven and my hell. I was destined to leave soon, following a path unknown, the light so faint that my eyes strained to see the rays and my heart yearned to feel its warmth again.

I would find it.

It was inside of me.

And because I is my job to set the Beacon free.

Chapter 1

402 Campbell Lane

We pulled up to our *new* house, 402 Campbell Lane. I couldn't think of a word less likely to describe this house than new. Decrepit, sagging, tired- yes, but not new. I knew how excited Dad was about this new position at Providence College so I kept my negative thoughts about the house to myself. In fact, I had been keeping my negative thoughts to myself the duration of the entire move.

I held my breath from the first, "Hey, Layla, we need to talk," until Dad's final words as he exited the car, "We're here."

I sat in the passenger side of our SUV, not yet wanting to face reality. If I got out of the car it would mean that our journey was complete, that this was truly going to be my new home, and that my life in Alexandria, Louisiana was now over. I sighed heavily and kicked through the pile of road trip trash that had accumulated on the floorboard around my feet. I used my shoulder to heave the door open. I was tired from the long trip across too many miles to count.

One foot out...

Other foot out...

Now to stand up.....

I could hear Dad mumbling endlessly in excitement. I didn't want to turn around and face my new reality, so I stared off at the other houses that surrounded me. They weren't so bad- quaint, homes that had to be almost one hundred years old. Most were kept up, showing their maturity instead of the age. I just hoped ours had air conditioning. I heard that not all homes in

the north have air conditioning because it doesn't get hot enough for it, which in my mind was utterly insane. Living in the South, that wasn't an option. But I wasn't in the South anymore. I had to keep reminding myself that.

But air conditioning was supposed to be included, Dad had double checked with the Dean about that since it was technically campus housing.

The street was smooth and straight. I could imagine little kids riding up and down in the evenings, and older boys playing baseball in the middle of the road, annoyed when a car would interrupt their game. Smiling a bit, I hoped there were girls my own age that lived around here. I knew it would be hard to make friends as a Senior but I wanted to try.

But I didn't want to think about that now. If I thought of making friends, then I would think about school, and then I would think about homework...

I figured this move didn't have to mean the end. Dad often reminded me that this could be a new beginning- even if I didn't want one. There was no sense in turning into a sullen teenager now. I doubted my dad would even notice anyway.

I turned around.....

Through the large oak trees I could tell the house was old like every other one on the street- except this one looked its age. The siding was white and it had a large steely blue front door with a large glass window. It could have passed for welcoming way back in 1968. The sidewalk to the front door was cracked and crumbling with age, and the grass was patchy, each blade screaming for water. I went from afraid to look, to unable to take my eyes off it. It was

like staring into the unknown, or a car crash, my eyes searching for the injured person that would be pulled from the wreckage.

I hadn't felt this desolate since junior high.

Dad noticed my silence and stopped talking to himself. His gaze turned to me, and I found him staring at me as he so often did, like I was still wearing pigtails.

His eyes softened, taking in my obvious angst. "Thanks." He sighed, walking back toward me and the car, "I know it wasn't easy to leave."

That phrase is getting tired.

"No, it wasn't." I smiled and decided to be truthful, my big girl panties firmly back on, "but I know how excited you were about this job. I only had one more year until college myself. I can finish them up here just as easily as I could in Alexandria."

Still envisioning me with pigtails, "I don't know how I got so lucky to have such a daughter. Let me know when you decide to turn into a rotten teenager, so I can be ready?"

"Sure," I said with a smile. "You still have me for another whole year. You better be careful what you wish for."

His smile was a little off, "Time to go," he said curtly, ending our conversation.

I slammed the car door and moved around to the other side to stand by dad.

I could make this work. I will make this work.

I have always been a positive person, and I knew keeping that trait was important at a time like that. No one wants to be friends with depressed head case, after all.

Worry about friends later!

“Time to check out the inside,” I said with mock sincerity.

Dad took my hand in his, and we walked up the broken path to our front door. A key came to us in Louisiana through the mail from the Dean of Liberal Arts, dad’s new boss, at Providence College, dad’s new school. Dad now had it on his key ring and pulled it out of his pocket and inserted it into the lock. The door creaked open, “Into the belly of the beast,” dad said, trying to make me smile.

Our eyes swept left to right, our necks craned. I don’t know what dad was waiting for, but as for me, I had seen too many scary movies that began this same way, and I wasn’t about to fall through the rotten floor or set off a hidden booby trap. I gave the place a good once over before stepping through the doorway, careful to watch for any swinging axes or ghostly apparitions. Dad walked through first and without looking back motioned for me to follow.

The wooden floors were bare and looked sturdy, the walls were white, and the light bulbs were all missing the fixtures. It was truly a blank canvas. The many people that had lived here had taken all the personality with them, leaving only an empty husk. The only thing that lingered was a dank smell of empty. The house seemed sad without any memories, which is probably the real reason it looked so depressed- it was missing it’s soul.

I suddenly wanted to embrace it, put my soul into the emptiness and give this house a little life again. As I walked from room to room I became a little more excited, imagining where

the couch would sit, the old set of shelves my grandfather built lined with my dad's favorite books. My smile came unbidden, while Dad and I played like children on a merry-go-round on the bottom floor of our new home.

Kitchen- check, living room- check, office-check.

"The bedrooms must be upstairs." Dad said bringing back to the present.

"Do you think I could get the bigger room? I do have more stuff." I cooed, giving him my sweetest smile.

"Not a chance." He said over his shoulder and he made his way up.

I followed him up the creaky stairs to the first bedroom. The banister wobbled as I pulled myself around the turn and made my way to the second floor landing.

"My room, looks like?" I pointed to the doorway directly in front of us, which overlooked the front of the house.

"I'll let you look around," he squeezed my shoulders and went to search through the bathroom and other bedroom.

"Mmm hmmm." I said distractedly, pushing to door open a little further.

The room was small, with slanted ceilings that met the walls at funny angles mimicking the steep roofline of the house. The closet was small as well. It did have one redeeming attribute- an enormous window that overlooked the yard and street in front of the house. I didn't think much of the house so far, but this window was just amazing. It was set back into a niche, creating a private cubbyhole. The large single pane of glass was slightly wavy, which I knew

meant it was very old, hand poured, and probably original to the house. I could see putting a chair underneath it for reading, or maybe push a desk right up to the sill so I could look out while I studied. I remembered my earlier thoughts about air conditioning and searched the ceiling. I was relieved to see an air vent. Thank goodness, I thought.

I didn't have my own bathroom like I did in Louisiana, but I could share. Dad mainly taught night classes and web courses, he wasn't much of a morning person, which meant we wouldn't have to fight over who was going to use it first in the mornings.

I skipped back downstairs, my mood getting a little lighter with every step. I made my way back out to the car to grab the first arm load of my things. We piled all of our most precious possessions in the SUV with us. The rest of our things would come shortly when the movers brought the large moving van. I slung my backpack on my shoulder after filling it with my books computer, and phone. My suitcase, I heaved out from underneath some other boxes in the backseat.

It was well into the afternoon, the day mostly over. But time wasn't an issue. I had nothing on my schedule for a couple of days, I could stay up late and unpack. I wanted to get settled in the house before I thought about anything else- like beginning my senior year of high school completely alone.

I just dropped my stuff in the middle of my empty room and heard the heavy diesel chug of the moving truck outside.

I knew dad wouldn't need to help with all the heavy lifting, but being the only female in the house, organizing and decorating fell on my shoulders. That was something I never really enjoyed but it was a necessary evil. How was I supposed to know where the couch would look

best, or where to hang pictures? Between the two of us, our mish-mosh style fell somewhere between bachelor pad and reclusive cave. Our house was comfortable for us, and that's what mattered. Dad and I both loved the feeling of sinking into that sagging couch, and the simple, worn kitchen table reminded him of my mother.

I never knew her. So nothing in the house actually brought back any memories- but that didn't mean there wasn't a giant hole in my life where she should have been.

I have felt the absence of her presence always.

Dad told me many times that she had picked the table out and saved for it without ever telling him. There is a black ring on one side where she placed a pot of boiling pot of potatoes that was way too hot for consumption. That had been there first dinner together sitting at the table. Mom was crushed, but dad just reassured her, "furniture it meant to be used, not protected."

Our belongings were a lot like us- well-loved but scarred.

I wondered what my mother would think about how our lives turned out. Where would we be? What would our family have been like if she were still alive? I thought about her often. I miss her even though I don't remember her, especially at times like that, when life expected me to be so grown up. I never felt like I got to be a kid. Dad never meant to rely on me like he had, or leave me alone to grow up in an empty house, but it happened anyway.

His first love was my mother. I don't know the man he was when he was with her, I only knew the shell that her death had left behind. He tried for me, I know, but his sadness hung around him like thick heavy shackles.

My father's second love was his books. He was forever reading, pouring through his research to prepare for a lecture. He had written a handful of books on ancient Mesopotamia, or maybe it was Egypt. He was a history professor and even taught a few anthropology courses at times.

I came in a close third. I'm sure if I ever voiced my feelings out loud he would disagree and be forever wounded. So instead of being pissed, I buried my feelings and went about cooking, cleaning, and earning good grades so he would be proud of me.

Amid my deep thoughts, the movers begin carrying the larger boxes first. "Those are marked kitchen. Just put them on the counter and I'll sort them out later." I really didn't want to think about later. I wanted them to get to the boxes marked "Layla." I was ready to get my room in order- the kitchen could wait.

I wore a steady path between the living room and the moving truck for about an hour, directing the movers with the furniture and the boxes. Either they were unloading the truck in record time, or we really didn't have a lot of stuff. I glanced into the almost empty truck seeing the kitchen table revealed. It was the first thing on the truck, and the last thing off- that had to mean something. I smiled thinking of the burn mark I hadn't seen in a while, hoping that with our belongings in the house, it would feel like a home I could enjoy.

The sun dipped down and touched the tops of the trees, causing long shadows to dance on the ground. Dad was tipping the movers, thanking them again for making the long trip. Our earlier excitement waned, leaving room for exhaustion to set in. The long journey was catching up with me. I had made the decision to at least organize my own room. It was time to get that done.

“I’ll order pizza,” I heard dad yell as I retreated back into the house.

“Sounds good,” I replied, too tired to even turn around. I trudged up the stairs and surveyed the sea of boxes and plastic trash bags that was my new room.

I have never been one to hold onto things. I’m not sentimental about books, journals, or keepsakes. My room was very sparse, like the rest of the house. It didn’t take me long to move my bed and desk into place. I decided to put my twin bed on the wall facing my window. I figured waking up with the sunshine sounded like a good idea. I had just enough space to put my desk next to it, so it would double as a night stand. Most of the time I did my homework sprawled out on top of my bed anyway. I pushed my small bookshelf onto another wall by the closet door. My closet was deep, and could accommodate my chest of drawers easily, and would hide much of my messy side from my father or anyone else who came into my room. I didn’t like clutter, and I didn’t like messiness- but I was kind of a slob when it came to picking up my clothes and shoes.

The massive picture window remained unadorned. Reluctantly I figured I would have to get some kind of curtain.

But not tonight.

The sky was tinged with purple, shot through with streaks of yellow still visible through the tall trees around the neighborhood. I would wake up with the dawn window every morning- every teenager’s dream.

At least it was a pretty view.

With all the major furniture taken care of, I began working on my closet. My clothes had been packed up over a week ago, and they needed to breathe. I had shoved most of them into the boxes still on the hangers. My entire wardrobe didn't fill up the small closet.

"I need to do some serious shopping," I mumbled aloud.

I inherited the habit of talking to myself from my father. The only time this was confusing was when we were both in the same room and each having our own conversations, a habit resulting from spending too much time in our own company.

I heard the doorbell from chime and knew the pizza man was here. "Pizza," I heard my dad yell up to me. My stomach was begging me to take a break, and looking at the dismal state of my wardrobe I quickly caved. At the moment I didn't want to be reminded of my lack of decent clothes. I made my way down stairs to find dad had opened the boxes and made a quasi-picnic, using the pizza box as a plate, and a couple of boxes as a table.

Well, at least we're sitting down together.

Dad and I didn't have too much in common. We didn't talk much either, maybe because I reminded him of my mother. I loved my father deeply, but I was counting down the days until graduation. I had no idea where I wanted to go to college, I just knew I was going, and not looking back.

"How's it going up there?" he said handing me a slice.

"It's okay. Did you notice that amazing window in my room?"

He raised his eyebrows and pointed his pizza at me saying, "Don't get any ideas about sneaking out." He was obviously kidding.

“Dad, who has to sneak? You wouldn’t even miss me!” I said trying to hide the truth of my words. I huffed, “even if I did sneak out, who would I go with? I would need to have someone to meet or somewhere to go first. So far I have neither of those things.”

“That’ll come,” he assured me, “I’m sure you’ll make friends in no time.”

By his words, it was painfully obvious dad forgot what it was like being the new kid in town. “Hey, that reminds me. School starts next week, and I need to buy some new clothes. I should probably get a couple things that would be warmer. I don’t think my shorts and flip flops will work for long.”

“Sure. Whatever you need.” He hesitated, “You want me to go with you? I don’t know how much help I could be...” He was stammering now, trying to worm his way out of a shopping trip and quality family time.

“No, Dad, really, thanks. I don’t mind going alone. It will give me a chance to try driving in the city. I don’t think I’ll go for a couple of days so it doesn’t matter. We should take a few days a get settled, you know?”

We both took a bite of pizza. I could tell he was relieved to be off the hook. I appreciated him trying, but it wasn’t necessary. I really could go shopping by myself. I should probably get some kind of snow boots or warm jacket.

When does it start snowing around here anyway?

“I know you have a lot to do with the house, not to mention your classes starting soon. Who knows, maybe I’ll meet someone.”

As if on cue the doorbell rang. I was the faster of the two, “I got it,” I said trying to swallow the last bit of food in my mouth. I flipped on the porch light and looked through the peephole at a girl about my age with blond hair and brown streaks running through it. She was staring directly into the peephole, expectantly. After a few seconds her expression changed to impatience. I watched her watching me through the peephole. Shaking off my rudeness, I opened the door. She greeted me with a friendly smile and spoke first.

“Hi, I’m Ben Taylor. I saw you moving in earlier today. My mom told me to wait a few hours before I came over. Sooo, it’s been a few hours, and I saw the pizza man just leave.....”

She was waiting me for to invite her in and but didn’t want to be presumptuous, “I figured now would be the perfect time to come over and meet you. I’m Ben, by the way? Did I say that already? Sorry...”

“Hiiii...” I said, unsure how to handle her verbal explosion. My southern accent would give me away for sure, so I didn’t speak. My dad took that moment to join me at the door.

“Hi there,” he flashed Ben an endearing smile, “Layla, who is this young lady?” he asked me but held Ben’s skeptical gaze.

“Well, we’re not friends yet, but we will be.” Ben replied optimistically.

“This is Ben. She is our neighbor....”

“Across the street.” She finished, pointing the house directly across from ours.

“Well wonderful. Won’t you come in?”

“I’d love to,” she said, sidestepping me into our living room.

Dad took over from here, “My name is Dr. James Justus, and this is my daughter, Layla. “I smiled over at Ben trying hoping to appear happy and not nervous. “Layla is going to be a senior this year.”

She quickly furrowed her brow and added, “Wow, that’s rough- new town and new school your senior year?”

I shook my head quickly, playing it off, “Whatever. As long as I finish, right? This last year’s gonna be great, I know it. Dad got this great job at Providence College for the fall semester and we both thought it would be a great idea. Right, dad?” I looked to him for support.

“Sounds...great.” Ben saw right through my words, “Anyway, I’m a senior too. Are you going to North Providence High School? That’s where I go, and most of the kids from this neighborhood too.”

“Yeah?” I tried to remember if that was in fact the name of my new school.

“Great.” Dad chimed in, repeating that horrid word.

We stood there in awkward silence for a moment.

“Well, I’m going to clean up dinner and work on the kitchen. I’ll let you girls talk. Sorry about the mess, Ben, but it can’t be helped. It’ll be a proper home in a couple of days.” His smile fell away as he began wondering out loud, “Ben- that’s an interesting name for a young lady.” He continued muttering to himself as he picked up the pizza box and headed into the kitchen.

“It’s short for Bennett,” she informed him, “My mother’s maiden name. I know it’s weird....” Ben quit directing her words toward dad when she realized he wasn’t talking to her at

all, but to himself. “It was nice meeting you, Dr. Davis,” she yelled in the direction of the kitchen.

“Justus.”

“What’s ‘Justus?’”

“That my dad’s last name. My last name.” I smiled and corrected her, “not Davis.”

“Oops,” she waved her hand nonchalantly.

She looked back to me, “So Layla Justus?”

“Bennet Taylor?”

We both smiled. “It’s pretty crazy in here right now. You wanna sit on the porch?” I suggested.

“Sure.” She agreed, but first managed to swipe a piece of pizza from the greasy box on the table.

I grabbed two of the chairs which had yet to officially make it to the kitchen. Ben held the door open, while I situated both chairs a reasonable distance from each other. “Would you like a drink or something? We have.....water. That’s about it. Sorry.” We both laughed at my own lame offer.

“No, I’m good.”

I noticed she had a very small piercing on the left side of her face, just above her lip. I never particularly liked piercings, tattoos, and such, but it looked really good on her, almost glamorous. The tiny diamond sparkled in the light when she talked.

“So tell me about yourself,” Ben said politely.

“Hmmm.” I hesitated, not wanting to say something stupid. “We just moved here from Alexandria, Louisiana. It’s just me and my dad. My mom died when I was a baby.”

I grimaced. *That* was exactly what I shouldn’t have said. Any time I bring that up people never know how to handle it.

“Wow, that’s rough. I guess it’s good you and your dad are so close, right?”

Good recovery

“Actually we kind of do our own thing. Dad is a history professor, and between his office hours and his night classes, he’s not here much.”

“That’s kind of self-involved, if you ask me.”

Wow! She’s...honest!

This girl didn’t mince words. I was impressed, “I don’t mind. He likes what he does, and I don’t want for anything. It works. Some kids have parents who hover over them all the time. My dad’s not like that. I think it’s because he trusts me. I hope it is anyway.”

“Well that’s cool. Me, I’ve got those parents who hover, like you said. At least I know they love me. That’s what they say anyway.” She laughed and rubbed her shoulders.

The night had brought with a hint of cold that slipped up our short-sleeved shirts leaving a layer of chills in its wake.

“I think they secretly get pleasure in driving me crazy, you know? I’m an only child, so they don’t have anyone else to bug but me. You have any brothers or sisters?”

I shook my head and we talked on heedless of the cold or the lateness of the hour. It was still summer after all.

We continued chatting about our families, movies, and eventually whipped out the cell phone and compared music and photos. It was deep into the night when Ben’s porch light came on and a middle-aged lady leaned against the screen door and stared us down with an expectant smile on her face. She waved slightly when Ben made no move to stand.

“That’s my cue.” She said, rising up out of the chair with an exaggerated sigh.

“I’m glad you came over,” I said honestly.

“Me too.” She hopped down the stairs and weaved around the cracks of the sidewalk like she had been here before.

“Hey Ben,” I called out before she crossed the street, “do you like to shop? I haven’t bought any school clothes yet. I was waiting to see what I would need and…”

“Of course!” she interrupted. “I can show you my favorite places.” She looked me up and down, “You’ll like them, promise. You wanna go tomorrow?”

Whoa!

“Sure. I don’t have many more days to get it done I guess.”

“Great! I’ll drive. We can get the rest straight tomorrow. My mom’s foot is almost all tapped out.” We both turned our heads to look at her mother. Under the dim light of the front porch we could see she was indeed tapping her foot.

I quickly gave her my cell number and watched while she programed it into her phone. Ben fluttered back across the street. When Ben’s feet hit the curb of her yard, I could hear her mother started in on her with a stern look and soft words. She was probably chastising her for bothering us when we obviously had so much to do.

“Good night,” I yelled to Mrs. Taylor, letting her know it wasn’t upset. She smiled and waved back at me. I felt jealous as I watched the tableau play out. It was probably after Ben’s curfew. It was late after all.

“And is my father wondering where I am?” I asked myself petulantly.

I was just about to open the front door and yell when I noticed him sprawled on the couch softly snoring, obviously okay with me keeping such late hours. Not wanting the night to end quite yet, I shut the door and sat back down in my chair on the porch, propping my feet up on to the now empty chair, feeling the full effects of the day.

I took out my phone check the time. I was surprised to see it was after midnight. I checked to see if I had any new texts from my friends back in Alexandria. None. I thought about texting them, but decided not to. I had good curfew abiding friends back in Louisiana and they would definitely be tucked in their beds by now. More likely they were partying away the final hours of summer, not missing me at all.

I sat on the porch alone for a few more minutes. I guess for a first day it went well. The house was decent, I lucked out, getting a room with an awesome window, and I had already made one friend who happened to live across the street. Hopefully my luck would continue. This whole move to Providence was huge, and I wanted to find my rhythm quickly. The thought of going upstairs and finishing my room wasn't appealing. I guess it could wait until tomorrow. I had completed quite a bit in this first day. I didn't need to finish everything right now. I didn't like the thought of leaving things unfinished. Chaos bothered me. I didn't like my room contaminated with junk, even if it was my own junk.

But laziness won, and I enjoyed the porch a while longer.

The chilly air settled around me like a blanket. I could definitely get used to this, I thought. I inhaled this new kind of damp air. It felt weightless, tasted clean- unlike the air in the South. I wouldn't miss the oppressive humidity. There were some days I felt choked by it. I enjoyed the heat, but some days were just plain wet. The moisture in the air was palpable.

But not anymore. I didn't know what to expect of the weather here, but I could definitely get used to nights like that one.

I stood up to take the chairs inside when suddenly a pair of headlights appeared and the roar of an engine ripped through the calm night. Someone had been parked close the house, and since I didn't hear a car door open and close, it also meant they had been sitting there for a while. I stopped and listened to it idle for a while, not in a hurry to leave its cozy spot only a few houses down from mine. I couldn't see the driver, but I felt his eyes on me. They felt male. Only a guy would be out at this time of night in his shiny black Audi.

I stared back at the car, confident that whoever was in it was watching me at that moment. It was like we were in a battle to see who would flinch, look, or drive away first. I narrowed my eyes hoping to look intimidating instead of nervous, standing my ground on my new front porch.

The driver revved the engine.

I couldn't breathe. His presence pulled the breath from my chest and left it empty. Fear didn't begin to describe what was coursing through me. It was a mixture such intense sensations that almost brought me to my knees. I wanted to run toward that car and run away in the same instant.

I lifted my chin and said, "What the hell are you waiting for?"

It was as if he heard me, and chose that moment to end the game. He idled purposefully by me, letting me know with all certainty he was watching. I could see his silhouette, he bowed his head finally acknowledging my presence, as if to say goodnight. My nerves were getting the best of me. I didn't know how much longer I could pretend to be tough before I ran inside and hid under my bed. But the car never stopped, it just slowly rolled by my house and further on down the street. I watched the tail lights retreat into the darkness until I was sure it was gone. I was alone again, and more than a little scared. This was an unfamiliar place, after all. With shaking hands I picked up the chairs and launched them through the front door, intentionally making enough noise to wake up my father.

"We have interesting neighbors." I stated loudly, startling him from slumber.

“We sure do. She was nice,” Dad yawned, his eyes half closed. Clearly he was still thinking about Ben, even though I had another neighbor on my mind.

“Hey, you in for the night?” he mumbled.

I twisted the dead bolt on the front door hoping it would make me feel better, “Yeah. I’m headed upstairs. Goodnight, Dad.”

Chapter 2

Early Riser

My body was drained, heavy, and immobile. Last night I poured myself into bed after opening every box labeled with a capital L, ensuring my valuables were still intact. I checked every cover, every binding, needing to touch each one before I could call it a night. As I organized my precious books, I leafed through the pages of my favorite novels, stroking the covers like an obsessive mother coddling her babies. My books filled every shelf in my room, and even a few old wooden crates I had transformed into a night stand.

My favorite book, an old garage-sale paperback of *Jane Eyre* was perched in the place of honor- on the corner of my mattress under my pillow. The book had long white creases lining the thick binding, and many pages with torn corners from being repeatedly folded. I wrote my name on the inside of the cover page- Layla Justus, written in the prettiest script I could manage, which wasn’t saying much.

This simple flimsy copy of *Jane Eyre* was my most prize possession, and it was now half-shoved, the cover mangled under my old pillow, after reading it last night before I passed out from exhaustion. My dreams were a tangle of stormy and passionate eyes so blue, so intense

my body ignited with a foreign pulsing heat. The most beautiful mouth with straight white teeth was set in a grim downturned shape, either in disgust or rage.

I couldn't make out the rest of the face, only these two features- eyes too blue to real and lips like an incredible angry branding iron. I could feel those lips graze the skin at the base of my throat, shivers cut through me like white hot icicles. I woke up with the predawn gray slipping into my room, feeling frustrated and strangely alone.

I knew the eyes from my dream had been the same eyes glowering at me from that black car from last night, and the steamy kisses were a product of my favorite romance novel.

Is that what Jane felt the first time she saw Mr. Rochester?

"I'm officially lame." I huffed as I threw myself back onto my pillow. Thankfully no one else knew about the lameness of my crazy intense dreams- hot images of some guy I didn't even know.

I shook away the silly thoughts tried to focus the morning ahead. My mind was creating a list of all the chores I had to accomplish today. The sun wouldn't make an appearance in through my window until the afternoon, but I could tell the sky was beginning to lighten. I didn't know if Ben would want to go shopping in the morning or afternoon. I figured I should get to work on unpacking the rest of the house so I wouldn't feel too guilty leaving dad to do the majority of the work.

First things first: "coffee," I sighed.

Wearing mismatched pj's found in one of my boxes, I clomped down the worn wooden stairs. Exhaustion was making it quite difficult to be discreet, my heavy footfalls causing every

other step to groan or pop. At some time in the night Dad had retreated to his bedroom, probably to avoid my late night organizing binge and requisite early morning coffee exploit.

That thought brought me up short.

Did we bother to unpack the coffee pot?

Do we even have any coffee? My shoulders slumped in defeat because I knew the answer to my own question.

“Nooooo,” I moaned, holding my head, in classic caffeine-junkie style.

Coffee was a nonnegotiable. I had been drinking coffee with my breakfast all of my quasi-adult life, and would continue that tradition as long as the sun kept rising.

“If only I knew how to grow coffee beans...” I sulked.

I could drive up the road until I found a store. There was a *Stop n' Shop* not too far away. I knew Dad didn't want me driving the car without his permission. I hadn't had my license for very long, and Providence was a new city, *and* I had no idea how to get there. Dad didn't mind my independence so much when I was walking to school or getting a ride from friends, but I figured he wouldn't want me borrowing the car without permission. I dashed up the stairs to throw some clothes on.

A wrinkled pair of jeans, purple t-shirt, and Converse was the first things I could find. I wrote dad a note, explaining where I went, grabbed my cell phone, and headed out the door. The sky had already lightened up in the time I had been conscious. The houses surrounding mine had sprinkler systems watering their manicured lawns and newspapers thrown perfectly onto their freshly painted stoops.

The walking was actually helping wake me up. I felt more alert and aware of my surroundings. I was walking faster than I normally do; I would almost call it power walking. Maybe there was something to this whole exercising idea. Having been in the car for so long it felt good to move with a purpose.

I passed one house after another. They looked so similar, varying slightly in color and size - some beige, brown, yellow, white, and even blue. The front doors were always a shade of red, which some consider to be a vibrant welcome, but red doors always felt ominous, like they were portals, as if walking through them would take me somewhere evil. Some of my friends had red front doors on their houses back in Alexandria and I always found some excuse not to go into their homes. I usually made the excuse that no one was home at my house, and we could just hang out there. That usually worked.

All the red doors in this neighborhood bothered me just as much as it had then. I was like a cat, whose body went rigid when it was pushed too close to water, inching backward knowing it wasn't meant to swim. I didn't consider myself superstitious, but in my mind this wasn't a fear or irrational feeling, it was a fact - red doors were not to be entered.

But nevertheless, the houses were fun to discover, each with its own small front yard and lush looming trees. It was as if trees were a little mask, and you had to wait until you were at the right angle for the house to come into view and say, "surprise!" I liked them. I was comforted in knowing the neighborhood was homey and well cared for - despite their choice of color for doors.

I became so enamored of my surroundings I forgot all about my coffee run.

"Did I miss the turn? I wondered aloud.

I stopped midstride and looked around myself. I had taken a few twists and followed the meandering sidewalk, more interested in the houses around me, and less in finding the minimart I had seen the day before. There were people darting in and out of their houses picking up newspapers, some getting in their cars and headed for work. I must have been walking for quite a while - half an hour or so. Surely the little store wasn't that far away. At this rate I would find coffee by lunch time.

"I guess I can wait a little while longer." I whispered under my breath. I wiggled my toes which were beginning to ache from my morning jaunt.

I did a one-eighty and decided to head back the way I came. Maybe I could get home quickly and I could ask dad for borrow the car. I could tell him that I needed to do some grocery shopping. He didn't approve of my coffee habit much, but I didn't care *much*. The view behind me looked just as foreign. A giggle escaped my lips as I realized, "I'm lost!" As if admitting the obvious would make it less absurd. Who gets lost in their own neighborhood - new or not?

That fact that I was lost was no one's fault but my own. I wasn't someone who got lost easily. That happened to people in scary movies or toddlers who let go of their mommy's hand, not me. But there I was - too caught up in scenery that I didn't know where I was going. I blamed it on my lack of sleep and lack of coffee. At least if I headed back in this direction I knew I would be closer to my house than I was right now. I was becoming angry with myself for being such a dreamer.

The broken cement pieces crunched on the cracked sidewalk. I moved with my head down watching my feet instead of the places around me, worried that if I did look at one of houses it would peek through its mask of trees to laugh and point its finger at me. Instead of

smiling down at me with their cheerful windows and jolly waving trees, the windows appeared mockingly vacant and the dark red of their doors became disapproving frowns.

“Shut up,” I said to a white house as it sneered at me behind an oak tree.

I had wandered into a cluster of houses that were older and far more grandiose than our little house on Campbell. These tall square structures reminded me of the Southern plantation homes and the large family mansions from Louisiana. I knew these weren't mansions, and the styles were completely different, but what they did have in common was a commanding presence, alive with a history much longer than my own.

These homes were set farther back away from the street and farther apart from each other, everything about them from their yards, to the picture windows, moldings, and flowerbeds were just a little prettier, a little better than what surrounded other houses in my neighborhood.

I decided they were snobby.

After walking by a few I decided my favorite was a three-story square house with buttercream paint and navy blue shutters, no red on this house either. It had a stained glass window that shone in the morning light. The porch was wide and followed one side of the house into the back yard. Continuing on I craned my neck to get a peek of the backyard. There were tall colored plants along the fence. A massive oak tree taller than the house itself sat in the middle of the grass. By the size and height of the trunk I could tell it was here long before the house ever was. A few feet from the trunk were two old frayed ropes that headed straight up and disappeared into the leaves.

“A rope swing!” I gasped. That was something I had always wanted when I was younger.

An image of me on that swing penetrated my mind like a sharp dagger - intense and sudden. I reached for my forehead as I envisioned me, wearing an odd, old-fashioned red dress. I didn't own anything like that, so I knew it wasn't a memory. My hair was down flying around my shoulders. I made a wide arc in the air and headed backwards. Someone was behind me, pushing. I turned my head to glance back, smiling at whoever it was. We made such a pretty picture. It was the most beautiful young man I had ever seen. He had dark hair, a tight black t-shirt. His comfortable smile made me feel safe.

I stood there mesmerized by the vision I created, staring at the rope swing. I was seeing it hanging in front of me, but also I had pulled from the deep regions of my brain as if I remembered the dry rough rope rub against my skin of my hands. I probably dreamt it up out of sheer loneliness. Ever since last night's late night reading and subsequent reveries, I had woken up in such a fanciful mood. But no matter, my practical part of me was telling the other part to *get a life*.

I shook off the image. It was wistful, making me feel surprisingly vulnerable, like I was missing out on something, a piece of a puzzle left hidden.

Unfinished.

I already knew what I was missing- my mother. I'd been missing her most of my life. I tried not to wonder what my life would be like if she were still alive.

It was getting later into the morning and I was now convinced I was headed in the wrong direction. My street looked nothing like the one I was currently walking on. I knew if my dad needed me he would call. But I had been walking a while and was ready to wrap up this coffee-less adventure...

I felt my back pocket vibrate. I pulled my phone out excited at the prospect of news from Alexandria. I knew it wasn't my dad, he only called. He says texts are impersonal. I think he's just antiquated, like his books and lectures.

"Isn't a text the same thing as an email? And isn't an email really just like a letter sent through the mail?" I would tell him in defense of my generation's most popular form of communication.

At this point I wanted to hear from any friends from my former life.

"Oh..." I was disappointed and hopeful all at the same moment. The text was from Ben:

Pic u up in 1hr. K? Know a good place!

Ben! Shopping! Already? I checked my watch and it was 9:30. Wow, where did my morning go? I had been walking for over an hour.

K, I texted back. Hoping that an hour would be enough time to get back and get ready to go, and I definitely needed a shower now.

I decided to not let anything else distract me from getting back home. I couldn't remember exactly what the new house looked like, but dad's SUV was parked in the driveway and that would give it away. I figured dad was either asleep or gone, and he was the last person I wanted to call. I didn't need him turning into Superdad, thinking I was his helpless baby who

needed rescuing. We didn't rely on each other for much, and I liked it that way. But I was beginning to think I would mind the help just this once.

I pulled my phone out of my back pocket again, and scrolled through my numbers until I found dad's number. "He's never gonna let me forget this," I worried aloud. I put the phone up to my ear and waited until I heard Dad's groggy voice on the other end of the line.

One ring...

Two....

Three....

Four.....

"Hi, you've reached James Justus. Sorry I couldn't answer..." I hung up the phone.

I couldn't help but laugh at the craziness of my situation. Lost! My house has got to be around here somewhere. I knew my address, like any good five-year-old, I thought.

I'll just walk up to this version of Barbie's Dream house and ask them to point me in the right direction.

I turned toward a large white brick house with an inviting s-shaped walkway, still wet from the sprinkler system, and happy little pink flowers growing in circles around the trees the front yard. It looked like a polite house, which meant it might have polite, helpful owners.

As I took a step off the curb to make my way across the street, I could hear the distant hum of an engine, obviously in a hurry, and coming my direction. I looked down the street to see a black car speeding its way toward me. I could hear the car shifting into a higher gear. Stick

shift, I thought. All ideas of crossing the road were paused until this guy was out of my way. I wasn't going to get run over and end up as some Jane Doe down at the city morgue, because I was new in town and my father was too busy to notice me gone.

The car sped closer and closer until I noticed it just wasn't a plain black sedan, but a slick, jet black Audi - the same one that had started the staring contest with me the night before.

"Ahh, the welcome wagon. Wonderful," I said sarcastically, wishing that this person could hear me.

He drove like he owned the road, paying no attention to the speed limit. I didn't know how fast he was driving, but at the rate at which he was approaching me, I knew it wasn't a safe speed. I could imagine mothers grabbing their children to hold them safe as this racer flew by, their hair whipping their cheeks as it whizzed by.

I wanted to see what driveway he pulled into. By knowing where this jerk lived, I could avoid him as all possible times. So I waited there, three paces into the road, still a safe distance from any danger.

And then I could see his eyes.

A strange magnetism held me in place, either out of safety or curiosity. I did want to see where lived guy lived, but I also wanted to catch a glimpse of his face. I had already painted this figure as a nemesis in my mind, from the one previous encounter we had, but I wanted to actually see who I would be up against. I genuinely hoped this guy was short, fat, and ugly.

But that wasn't case. I watched, fixedly, as the midnight blur was almost upon me. It was in fact a man, not merely boy, behind the wheel. But *this* wasn't just any man, but a young

one. He must have been about my age. He was wearing sunglasses, even though there was no early morning sun from which to be shielded. I could see the outline of his strong jaw, set into a grim uncaring line. He had probably been out all night partying and was now making his way home, torn up and tired.

His car had finally zipped its way close enough for me to see him, and for him to see me. Then his face broke out into the most breathtaking smile I had ever seen?

Is that for me? Does he notice me standing on the side of the road?

Even though he was a pompous jerk, I still thought him gorgeous, which pissed me off further. That unfamiliar heat started in my chest snaking its way up my back and into my scalp, a fire burning below my skin. I didn't know if I like the way he made me felt. He was chaos and calm all wrapped up in a pretty polished package.

His elbow moved to hang out the open window and the car slowed a bit.

The smile, that I hoped was for me, was devilish, roguish, practiced.

And short lived.

The next few moments happened in slow motion. I was so busy staring at that lovely face, I forgot what a menacing presence he was the night before. The car came closer and closer. He never took his gaze off me as he approached.

That face, what I could see of it, those lips, the black sleeve of his shirt- this was *him*. The same *him* from my dream and the vision from this morning

Now I know I need coffee.

I noticed he had something in his hand, and was moving it towards the open window. I could feel my whole body following the movement of the car, willing it to stop so I could jump in with steal away with this handsome stranger.

But that wasn't meant to be.

I never saw it coming. One moment I was lost in thought about this mysterious guy, and the next my felt the bottom of my jeans soaked through.

My face fell, my heart sagged with it, all the way to my wet feet. I sputtered stupidly, gesturing wildly, trying to rationalize how someone so perfect could be so totally horrible.

“What the hell!” was my first intelligible sentence, by that time he and his gorgeous car had passed me by.

I was kicking my feet angrily, shaking the extra soda from my jeans and shoes. That jackass had thrown last night's soft drink at me. My head swiveled quickly just to see his tail lights escape down the street. I wanted so badly to run after him, hit something, or just scream. I felt my face, throat, and hands grow unusually hot. I couldn't ever remember being that angry before. But instead of acting on my dark urges, I closed my eyes, breathed in deeply, and tried to calm myself. I wouldn't be a hellion. I was a good little girl should.

There's no way he didn't see me. He was just being a jerk. It doesn't matter.

My face grew hotter and hotter, out of embarrassment, shame, and anger.

“Piece of.....garbage!” I shouted down the road, knowing he couldn't hear, but it made me feel better. I didn't care if I upset my uppity neighbors. After my morning excursion, and

now this! I wouldn't cry. That's just pathetic. Mean people were everywhere, I just happened to meet one quite soon in my new city.

That guy probably lived in the neighborhood, and I hoped I wouldn't have to endure him at school. That would be even worse. I realized where I still was and how ridiculous I looked, still standing in the middle of the street. I finally made my way across the street to the polite inviting house, hoping to get directions home. I could hear my wet feet squelch inside my shoes with each step. I wished I had put on something different, since these were my favorite pair. It takes a good while for me to break in a perfect pair of sneakers.

He was probably one of those good-looking, rich kids that put others down to make himself feel better. His life is probably so bad he takes it out on others.

I quickly turned my feelings from anger to sympathy, hoping to make myself feel better in the process. I was still embarrassed, but I figured someone couldn't be that horrible if they had a happy life. I decided to feel sorry for him instead of wasting my energy with loathing.

That seemed to calm the boiling blood coursing under my skin making my hands and face feel itchy from the heat. I didn't like to feel angry. It made me feel dirty, ugly. I didn't like the person I was when I was angry. I have always had careful control over my emotions, knowing that anger wasn't a healthy feeling.

Nothing good comes from dwelling on anger. I know it is better to work through my emotions so I could quickly deal with my negative feelings and turn it into something positive, just like my old high school counselor used to tell me in monthly chats. I was a product of a single-parent home, and thus on her at-risk radar. I think she was worried I would go off one day

and do something dangerous at school. I was a liability in her eyes, but in my own I was just trying to hold it together, like every other teenager I knew.

I knew that's what I needed to do now - hold it together, now feeling like a loser on top of everything else.

Self-pity - is that better or worse than being angry?

I wouldn't let this cruel moment ruin my day. I'd have to tell Ben about it. Maybe she knew who this creep was. Wanting to get home now more than ever, I knocked on the red door in front of me, praying its crimson voodoo wouldn't rub off on me. I hoped these people wouldn't invite me inside.

I was in luck. An older woman, noticing my distress gave me quick directions to make it home in a few minutes. She was nice, almost too nice, in the way nosy old ladies can be, but she was able to show me I was only a block over from my street. She introduced herself as Mrs. Bradley. She and her husband had lived in Providence for forty years. They knew the neighborhood very well. I mentioned I was new to town, my father a new professor at Providence College. With that, her eyes lit up.

"My dear, your house is actually just behind mine. I thought I heard some life back there yesterday. Is there anything you and you father need while you settle in?"

"No thank you," I smiled. "We are going to do a little grocery shopping later today. But we're surviving on take out until then. I do need to get home now," I took a few steps away, knowing Ben would be waiting for me soon. "It was nice meeting you. Thanks for the directions." I said waving down the sidewalk.

“Goodbye. Layla, was it? Be seeing you.” She waved goodbye from the front door and watched me walk away. I didn’t want to ask her about the Audi incident, I was still too embarrassed. Mrs. Bradley watched me walk away and follow the sidewalk around the corner. I turned around to give her one last glance and noticed her smile had widened to an inhuman, clown-like grimace. It took my breath away and made me stumble.

“Be careful, dear,” she called from middle of her perfect green yard. Her voice was a cacophony of sounds highs and lows that melted together as the words slipped from her face.

I blinked once, twice, blaming my imagination and tired eyes for the momentary hallucination. Her face had once again returned to normal.

My heart was racing once more, only now I wasn’t angry but completely freaked.

With my morning jaunt finally over, I was tired, weirded out, and wet from the shins, down. Knowing I was going shopping with Ben was the only thought keeping me from feeling lonely too. Following Mrs. Bradley’s directions, I made a right at the intersection and another right after that. I had turned a quick coffee run into a long, meandering trek through the old-fashioned homes of Providence. I didn’t mind getting lost as much as I minded the drive-by soda-soak.

“Finally,” I breathed. I walked up the path to my porch and sat down on the front steps. I took my shoes off and pulled out my phone. It would be a while longer until Ben arrived ready to shop.

The events of yesterday and this morning were grating on my nerves. I felt edgy, like someone was watching me. My skin crawled with remnants of an earlier fire. I rubbed my neck and decided a shower would make it all better.

I had let go of my anger and was now just resolute. This wasn't my fault, it was his - whoever *he* was. That still didn't stop the tears from welling up in my eyes. I held my breath, hoping that if I did the tears would stay in my eyes where they belonged and not spill down my cheek.

"Nope," I laughed as the first droplet touched the edge of my mouth. I licked my lips as it slid to the corner of my mouth.

Wiping my eyes with the back of my hand, feeling the strange heat in my fingers again, I stood up, shoes in hand, and walked back in to the house to officially get ready for the day.

The door creaked loudly, slid shut, and clicked closed. Dad been unpacking his books and putting them onto the bookshelf in the living room, leaving the empty boxes to block the entry through the front door. He turned as he heard me come in, and gave me a genuine smile.

"Good morning. Where have you been at such an early hour?" He asked cheerily.

"Dad, I left a note." I said pointing to the full-size sheet of paper sitting on the counter by the empty coffee pot, "Just out to get coffee." Suddenly angry I went on, "Hey, why didn't you answer your phone?"

I felt he should share part of the blame for my crappy morning. He just mumbled something about it being dead. He was busy reading the morning paper and drinking his coffee.

There was another extra-large cup sitting on the table next to his. He had apparently found the store before me.

At least he brought me some too.

I was too irritated to recount the tale to him. He obviously hadn't noticed my missed call. "Ben invited me out to go school clothes shopping. Is it okay with you if I go?"

"Sure," he said flatly, his eyes never meeting mine. He sounded a little disappointed, but he would never admit it, "I'm going to hang out here and get work on the house. Keep your phone on you and check in."

I started to hedge but he cut me off, "I'll be okay," he smiled, "You're supposed to be out having fun anyway. You only got a couple more days until school starts anyway."

"Thanks dad," I kissed his cheek and he squeezed my hand, and the conversation was over.

I couldn't believe that he was lecturing me on my phone. He was the one who never answered my phone calls. Dad went back to his paper and I headed upstairs to take a shower and hunt up something else less soggy to wear.

Chapter 3

His Name is Orrin

I dug through my suitcase and found the bulk of my hair products, make-up, and hair dryer. I made quick work of my shower and tried to hurry with the rest of my routine. I still felt wretched after the events of the morning.

Who throws soda at someone?

The doorbell rang just as I hunted up some decent flats, since my favorite, well-worn Converse were sticky and slightly cola colored. I checked the mirror one last time, flipping and fluffing my hair. I have never been a primper, but I needed a confidence boost. This was my first official outing in my new town, with my first new friend. I wanted to look my best, but my lack of time meant it was going to be a lip gloss-only kind of day.

Dad waited at the base of the stairs with Ben, perfectly polished in her pink punkery. They had been making polite conversation, which is always a challenge for dad, and both looked relieved as I skipped down the stairs. Ben was wearing a shirt that I could never pull off, a t-shirt with the neck completely cut out, which hung almost off one shoulder. She had a style mixed between punk and fairy princess. She wore pink lip gloss with her black nail polish and black eyeliner. Her streaky hair pulled back with a hair band. She looked cute and totally trendy, greeting me with a big smile.

“Hey, ready to go?”

“Yup. I really do need to get a few things before school. I didn’t think I was going to find time with all the moving.” I pulled out a crumpled sheet of paper that had some things I needed for school.

“What? There’s always time for shopping! That’s sacrilege.” She said, her words dripping with sarcasm. Ben promptly pulled it from my fingers and scanned it for approval, “I’m driving. Come on, you need some serious retail therapy to get you ready for your North Providence debut.” She grabbed my hand and started pulling me out the door.

“You’ve still got the credit card?” my dad asked.

“I’m good, dad. Thanks. I’m not sure when we’ll be back- this afternoon maybe?” I looked to Ben who just shrugged and then winked at me. She grabbed my arm and was pulling me out the door. “I’ve got my phone. Promise I won’t spend too much.”

Even though he never mentioned it, I knew money was a concern. Isn’t it a concern for all adults- especially a single father?

“Have fun,” he said. I could see sadness in his eyes, like a little puppy I was leaving behind.

Does he want to go? Dad hasn’t taken me shopping in years.

I shook off the uncomfortable thought and waved goodbye, giving him my most confident smile, hoping to lift his spirits in the process.

“It is going to be totally great having you live across the street,” Ben said as she bounded down the stairs. We slipped into her car and closed the doors.

“Where are we headed?” I asked.

“That depends. What are you looking for?”

“Everything I guess. I could use some more jeans. I wore a lot of shorts in Alexandria, all the way into November. That won’t really work up here, huh?”

“Ummmm, no. Winter starts early up here and the evenings are always chilly. Do you have a good jacket? That’s pretty necessary early in to the fall.”

“Blue jean only, and a couple of hoodies from my old high school,” But by the look on her face, I knew that wasn’t going to cut it in Rhode Island.

“I think you’re going to need an overhaul,” Ben said with a sneaky smile on her lips. She was formulating a plan, and it seemed I was going to be her new pet project.

“I don’t think I can afford an overhaul, but why don’t we start with some jeans, a jacket, and a few tops. I don’t know what I want. I’ll just look around until I see something. I should probably get some school supplies too. Where’s the nearest mall?”

She scoffed, “No, no, no, newbie. We’re not going to the mall. I’m taking you to somewhere better. And school supplies? What for?” She laughed. Ben put her foot down on the gas and the car lurched forward onto my second adventure of the day.

Ben was the epitome of a crazy driver. She swerved in and out of cars, driving on the residential roads, all the while slapping on hand on the wheel while Paramore blared on her one working speaker, which was on my side of the car. I silently prayed we didn’t have to get on the freeway or any bridges. I grabbed the handle above the window to steady myself as she veered down another road, narrowly cutting someone off.

She babbled about anything and everything that was on her mind, all the while keeping her eyes glued on me, occasionally glancing at the road for safety reasons. I was trying to steady my breaths and keep up with her one-sided conversation. Ben's mind, and mouth, moved at warp speed, I barely understood what she was saying before she moved on to another topic. I wondered if she had some form of ADHD.

I liked her more and more. Her spirit was infectious. She fed the silence that I was so tired of enduring from the long car trip with my dad. It was obvious we were very different. She was outgoing, confident, loquacious, and funny. I was reserved, responsible, and as dry as burnt toast. I could tell she was comfortable with who she was, a unique attribute for a teenager, for sure.

I looked out the window at sky above us. Alexandria was steamy and hot most months out of the year. I always went for comfort with my clothes - shorts, t-shirts, ponytail. I never planned my clothes or coordinated my accessories. There I was, shopping with a girl who set out multiple outfits on her bed the night before, her outfits admittedly required deep contemplation. I was the girl who pulled on yesterday's shorts and hoped my shoes weren't talking yet. But I didn't have to be that Southern slob anymore. I could embrace this makeover and create a new look.

Maybe.

We abandoned the residential part of Providence. The sights of the city flew by in a colorful blur. Providence was different than any place I had ever been. I looked forward to touring the city and its historic places, but that would have to wait until another time. Ben continued to drive into a hip, downtown area. It was filled with shops, boutiques and cafes,

window displays of the latest fashions, and people of all ages sporting sunglasses and Bluetooths. I noticed quite a few teenagers filling the sidewalks, but mainly the storefronts were filled with posh twenty-somethings, dressed with understated elegance- money. I suddenly felt underdressed and overwhelmed.

“I don’t think I can afford to shop here, Ben.” I murmured.

“Jeez, you haven’t even made it into a store yet and you’re already having sticker shock? Just calm down. You can have a panic attack after you’ve bought something.” She smirked, not taking her eyes off the road.

Ben found a spot on the road and tried parallel park, hitting the curb twice and narrowly missing the luxury car in front of her. I was glad to be still for a moment. My driver was still rambling, now on the subject of the different stores, I still wasn’t able to follow her conversation. My mind was still a couple miles behind my body, and would be arriving shortly.

I looked over at Ben when I noticed a hush has fallen over the car. She was obviously waiting for me to say something.

“Uh, I’m sorry. What were you saying?” I asked stupidly.

“So where do you want to start?” She rolled her eyes in exasperation, “Were you listening any of the shops I suggested?”

“No,” I smiled sheepishly, trying to come up with a cover, “I...I’m sorry. I was so busy looking at everything. I’ve never seen a town likes this. Ever!”

Which was true. I had lived in Alexandria my entire life. The farthest north I had ever visited was South Carolina. I also have a great Aunt that lives in Texas, but other than that, my

dad and I didn't travel much. There weren't even any grandparents for me to visit since they had all passed on before I was born.

I'd seen many cities online, in movies, and in history books, but seeing a bustling and lively city like Providence was different in person. Ben just saw her familiar home town. I had the eyes of a tourist, noticing the old architecture, and quaint streets that had been there for hundreds of years.

"Well, then I get to pick the stores. No worries. You're in great hands. We'll start on this street and head that way," she pointed out the front windshield. There was a long expanse of stores in front of us, all with awnings and large glass windows.

"This is going to be a long day," I sighed.

"Oh, you have no idea, girl. Let's go!" Ben said excitedly.

"No. No. No. Ooooh, yes for me! No. No...Ughhh," Ben complained, looking through all the tops I picked out and had slung over my forearm. "You're hard to shop for." She scowled, "So far you've only told me you like dark colors, t-shirts- which by the way do nothing for that awesome rack of yours, and jeans. Could you gimme a little more to go on?"

"I like purple," I mumbled in my defense. It came out sounding like a weak question.

The shopping trip had turned into Ben's personal crusade to modernize my wardrobe. She had yet to even see most of my clothes, but I guess what she did see, she deemed unacceptable. I picked a few things off the rack, and Ben promptly pulled them out of my hands and would give me something else, "How about this?" She'd ask raising her eyebrows, waiting for me to mirror her delight.

The truth was I dreaded clothes shopping. I only did it out of necessity, and never for fun. I felt awkward and ungraceful looking at my reflection. I was a giant hourglass, bountiful, size 10. I hated being a double digit. The dressing room was like my own personal warzone- me versus the clothes. I usually lost. So I usually stuck to t-shirts that various groups from my high school sold as fundraisers.

Geaux Gators!

It was almost lunch time. I had found a couple pair of acceptable jeans. Ben convinced me try buy a pair of skinny jeans, which I would bury deep in my closet and never wear. I didn't look too bad in them, but they felt tight and revealed a sliver of skin on my back unless I wore a long shirt. I'd never worn anything like that.

My stomach was growling, and I remembered I didn't get breakfast, only coffee. I could feel a headache forming at the crown of my head. It would soon wiggle its way through until it dug its claws into my temples. I needed some food, fast!

We managed to finish up in the last store, Ben finding a few tops and a black leather jacket that she claimed was a "must have." I figured if Ben liked it then it was worth buying. All in all, I hadn't spent too much, and I did get what I needed. The three bags I was carrying were weighing me down. It was like carrying a feed sack in the crook of each elbow. With

Ben's encouraging assistance, I had spent way too much. The day's events were catching up to me, I had yet to freak about the prices, I'd worry about that later when my dad looked at his bank statement.

As we walked out into the sunshine, I flipped my sunglasses down over my eyes. I didn't put much make-up on and didn't want to advertise how bedraggled I looked and felt.

"Ya wanna grab some lunch? I'm starved. Shopping's just like a work out for me." Ben sashayed out of the store behind me.

We scanned the area to try and find an acceptable café or restaurant. Sitting on the corner in front of us was an appealing, little place with French doors and awnings hanging lazily over the windows. The tables spilled out of the doors and onto an enclosed terrace where I noticed most of the patrons were eating.

Ben gestured to the restaurant, "Problem solved."

We crossed the street quickly and made out way into the front door. We walked up to the counter to place our order. Looking at the large menu above the cash register, I saw my favorite, chicken salad. I asked Ben to place my order, so I could run the restroom.

I weaved my way between the tables as I headed for the back of the room. I figured the restroom should be somewhere in the back. Too focused on my unknown destination, I stumbled sideways as a girl at one of the tables drove her chair backwards and straight into my hip. I caught myself and quickly turned to apologize.

"I'm so sorry. Excuse me." I tried to say politely and quickly, even though she was the one who bumped me.

“Whatever.” She replied rudely, her thick Northern accent, making her sound like a real bad-ass. She scoffed loudly enough that the others at her table snickered and stared, with enough attitude to stop me in my tracks.

I didn’t want to give this girl my attention and feed her bitchiness, but she was still in my way. She was still sitting down in her chair looking at me out of the corner of her slitted eyes. It was obvious that she was trying to knock me over on purpose.

Seriously?

As I turned away from her I noticed almost everyone at the table staring, waiting for me to either scurry away or stand up to her. All except one.

It was him. Eyes downcast, scanning through something on his phone, paying no attention to the scene his friend had just caused.

The guy from last night.

The same guy from my dreams.

The piece of scum who threw a drink at me from the window of his fancy-schmancy car. Surrounded by his friends now, he was the only one who wasn’t looking at me, and the only one I couldn’t look away from.

He sat with his back to me, his ankle propped up on the opposite knee. I couldn’t see his eyes, only his glossy dark hair, slinking down to touch the collar of his white shirt. The body underneath that shirt was broad and solid.

He was so close I could reach out touch him.

He chewed on the end of his straw, and listening to the action surrounding him. I knew by his tense shoulders he was waiting to find out what I would do next. He was giving nothing away to the world. But it was enough for me. He had started playing a game with me last night, and apparently in his mind he wasn't done. Only now, it seemed he had set up a chess board and brought out and sacrificed one of his pawns to determine my next move.

The world around me dissolved. I forgot where I was what I was doing, and even the unfriendly people surrounding me. It was just him and me. I had to confront him and come out on top. I didn't know who this guy was, but I had never cowered to a bully before, and I wasn't going to start now. I may be an outsider, but I wasn't a pushover. I side-stepped his little pawn's chair, which was still in my way, and walked around to stand directly in front of his chair.

"I'm done with you anyway, bitch." She uttered as I took a few steps over to stand right over him.

I folded my arms over my chest, feeling the foreign yet familiar heat on my fingers, and gave the top of his head the ugliest glare I could muster.

"Excuse me," I said through clenched teeth and cleared my throat.

He raised his head and brilliant blue eyes met mine.

How did I know the exact color of his eyes? How did I know they would be just that mesmerizing?

Why can't I breathe?

I kept silent. He knew who I was. I could tell from his wicked smile revealing zero remorse, only contempt for me. His eyes held mine for a moment, then freely roamed the length of my body. I don't know why a complete stranger would hold me in such contempt, especially one I was deeply moved by.

“What's your problem?” the words left my mouth with my entire supply of oxygen, making me sound breathy and weak. “What kind of human being throws a nasty half-drunk soda at someone they don't even know?”

He said nothing but cocked one eyebrow in amusement.

“Are you a jerk to everyone in the neighborhood or am I just lucky?”

Silence.

I wanted to say something cool and aloof and be just as big of a bad-ass as this guy, but I knew I failed miserably. He sat there, quiet as ever, staring up at me. His expression expectant, begged me to continue my silly tirade. I was only embarrassing myself after all, since no one else knew what I was babbling about. The rest of the table hung on baited breath; waiting to see how their leader would eviscerate me with his words and the scariest molten blue eyes I'd ever seen.

For some reason, I knew this moment between us was important, life-changing even. I wanted to win his approval, even though the sane part of my brain knew that was an insane idea.

Who cares about this guy! You don't!

But I did, and I couldn't explain why.

After a few moments of yet another staring contest, he stood up, the legs of the chair scraping loudly against the old wooden floor. He unfolded himself, his height impressive. The top of my head was only even with his shoulders. Being pretty tall myself, it was rare someone made me feel short and inadequate. He did both easily. I had to raise my head to look at him, but I refused to break eye contact and expose how intimidated I really was.

It was hard to hold his glare. I was completely swept up, immobilized by his hauntingly good looks. I couldn't help but take in that dark hair and skin, which were such a contrast to his piercing blue eyes. It was an unnatural combination. Arrogant was the only word that could describe him- besides breathtaking, of course.

As if in silent command everyone else at the table stood up to follow him, chairs scraping in unison. I was suddenly surrounded by strangers feeding off my nervous energy. I felt like a cornered mouse, staring a snake about to strike. I was no match for this guy and he knew it.

“Yeah, Layla,” he finally spoke, searching my eyes with such exposed vehemence, “I guess you are just *lucky*.”

His mouth was a few threatening inches from my face. I turned my head and closed my eyes to avoid his nearness. It felt like hatred spewed from his mouth, making the skin on my neck crawl, and eerie sensation I'd never experienced before. The heat from my fingers crawled up my arms and seemed to lodge itself in my chest, heating and hardening my heart against my earlier reaction to him. His voice was as heart-stopping as his looks. It wasn't fair. I was taken aback, undone by his nearness. The attraction was both infuriating and exhilarating.

WAIT, you horrible, mean monster! I just want an apology.

He seemed to read my thoughts because he smiled triumphantly back at me one last time. Without taking his eyes off me he dipped his head in my direction, a slight mocking bow. His crew stood staring at me, each falling in line after the other had left, like baby ducklings.

I caught sight of him through the window as he put his sunglasses on, his eyes shone unnaturally blue in the sunshine. I was astounded to see a large intricate, black tattoo scrawled over most of his right forearm. I was too far away to see any details, only the sheer size of it on a person about my own age.

A tattoo!

I couldn't help wondering what kind of teenager gets a tattoo that large. Didn't his parents care? Didn't it hurt? How old was this guy anyway?

In Alexandria that kid would have been breaking my school's dress code for sure. I just figured they felt differently about things like tattoos up here in the North. Needless to say, it was another effective element of his bad boy image.

I like him! An audible voice from within my head whispered.

No, I hate him. I corrected myself, shaking the aftershocks of our encounter.

Well, maybe not hate. But I dislike him immensely.

I thought he was gorgeous, and I hated myself for that even more.

After a quick trip to the bathroom, I went to find Ben. She was sitting at a table near the front window. She already had our food spread out on the table. I sat down and unwrapped my sandwich, trying to forget my third run-in with the blue-eyed bully. But my mood was soured.

I looked up from my food, and sighed. Ben stared at me with a meaningful smile.

“What?” I asked.

“What was that all about?” she asked.

So she had seen my showdown.

I gaped, “You watched all that and didn’t come help me?” I was shocked.

“You looked like you were holding your own.” Ben took a large bite of her sandwich smiling, “a little hot and bothered, maybe,” she giggled, “I didn’t think you two needed my help the way you were staring at one another. I thought you two were gonna devour each other for a second there.”

“No.” I said flatly and decided to eat my sandwich after all.

“So who is that guy anyway?” I tried to sound only mildly interested. I had let the requisite amount of time pass before bringing *him* up again. I hadn’t mentioned to Ben anything that happened last night or this morning.

“Well *he’s* your neighbor. Our neighbor actually,” after another bite, “he’s a real shithead actually.”

“Obviously!” I laughed through a mouthful of chicken salad.

“He lives a street over. You interested?” She asked leaning into the table.

“God, No!” I lied, “Go back to the shithead part,”

“Are you friends with him? Oh, I’m sorry,” She sputtered, “he’s actually only kind of a shithead. I didn’t know you guys were chummy or anything.”

“We’re not!” I ate some more, “Are y’all friends?”

“*Orrin?* No, Orrin and I aren’t close. Actually that’s an understatement. I don’t hang out with Orrin and don’t want to. He’s not a nice guy,” She warned, “kind of a bully.”

“Yeah, I can tell.” I kept digging, “So, his name’s Orrin. That’s different.”

“Yup. Orrin Darringer. Total asshole. Don’t waste your time- unless you’re going to stare at his lovely backside, that is.” Ben giggled, taking a sip of water.

“Do you do that often, huh?” I asked, laughing at her comment.

“Every chance I get! Have you seen that thing?” She pulled out her phone and scrolled through her photos.

“What do you have a picture of it saved on your phone?” I laughed.

“Possibly,” she whispered, her thumb moving madly over the slick surface, “I mean, No!” her voice now in a mockingly serious tone, “that would be wrong.”

We laughed together this time. It felt good to just sit for a while. My headache was mostly gone thanks to the food. I had fun this morning, but it was time to get back home and

help with the rest of the unpacking. We kept up the conversation easily, talking about the upcoming school year at NPHS. Ben told me about the best classes and teachers, where to sit at lunch, and what to avoid when I got to school.

“You already know *who* you should stay away from. If Orrin wants he can make your life hell. He has done it to a few kids since he’s been here.”

“Ahh, so he’s new too?”

“Yeah, I guess. The school’s pretty big, but I know the entire junior class.” She bragged. “Orrin transferred in some time last year. I think he was held back or something. He’s got an awesome body, but he doesn’t play football, soccer, or lacrosse. I figure it’s either because he can’t keep his grades up or he’s got a prison record.”

She continued, “besides Orrin’s little posse, he doesn’t really talk to anyone. He lets them do all his dirty work. He likes to stir the pot, you know what I mean. Start the rumors. That way he never gets caught. I just say, stay out of his way. Orrin isn’t a very...” Ben thought for a moment, “pleasant guy.”

“Enough about him. I don’t want to waste any more time worrying about Orrin Darringer.”

With that, I finished the rest of my lunch and mulled over the information Ben had given me. I reached for my bag to get a better look at my new leather jacket when it hit me:

How does Orrin Darringer know my name?

