

STRANGE LAND

by

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ABSTRACT  
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My dissertation, *Strange Land*, is about the transition from youth to adulthood as it follows a young woman that travels to India to seek change. There she finds challenges and comforts that she did not expect, as well as a new sense of normality that she didn't know she craved. My work is concerned with how a young woman copes with being simultaneously pushed into adulthood and held back in childhood.

The crossover fiction between young adult and adult literature influenced me heavily in the writing of this novel. In particular, Kristin Cashore's novel, *Graceling*, explores the ideas of identity construction and loss that are relevant in most crossover fiction and that I used heavily in my own work. Her work engages with the instability of relationships as a source of internal conflict and the problem of finding oneself after getting purposefully lost.

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For Eli, one dollar per page, right? And for Amy, who always believed I could write my  
butt off.

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{ *the deal* }

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*I*

It was one of those days when I'd give my right arm to be an orphan, or at least for the ability to speak my mind without biting my lip to shreds. Maybe I'd do better with the ability to control people with my mind, but I wasn't sure I wanted that kind of responsibility when I could barely take care of myself and my cat.

"Mother, I'm going to India?" I blew choppy bangs out of my face and tried to say it with more confidence. "I'm going to India." My reflection did not look convinced.

I tried to imagine myself in one of the *saris* that Natalie had described, but I couldn't get past the aqua tank top that showed off the dragon tattoo on my shoulder. She'd warned me that my usual wardrobe wouldn't cut it in Delhi, but she'd also promised to take me shopping. I turned away from the mirror to survey the chaos surrounding the suitcase on my bed. Loki, my cat, was lying in the middle of the clothes pile. My copper bracelets clinked together as I ran my hands through my short hair.

Tattoos, tank tops, and jeans. I sighed. I wasn't going to blend no matter what I packed.

I was used to not blending. Despite my privileged upbringing, I would never be mistaken for a trophy wife, which was my mother's plan for me. Her backup plan was for me to be a kindergarten teacher if she couldn't find a suitable husband before I finished college. *Samantha*, she would say, *we only want what's best for you*. The translation: we only want what we think is best for you. She couldn't even bring herself to call me Sam like everyone else.

I wanted something else. Something strange and exciting and different.

I slammed the suitcase shut, and Loki sprinted out of the room with his ears back. Packing was only a form of procrastination for the upcoming battle. Like every Sunday for as long as I could remember, Mother demanded the family gather for brunch around her table. I winced. She wasn't going to be happy when I shared my news, and I'd made it my life's work to avoid confrontations with her.

Twenty minutes later, I'd traded my khaki shorts for a flowing skirt, added a wrap sweater around my tank top, and made the fifteen-minute drive to my parents' house. I was early, so I was put to work decorating the table and setting out food.

"Don't let her bully you, sis. If you want to go, then just go. Don't ask permission. You've talked to Natalie, right?" My brother, Josh, slouched against the breakfast bar as he "helped" me set the table. He got all the good looks in our family and none of the ambition. Broad shoulders, chestnut hair, eyes the color of a glacier, and he refused to do anything as strenuous as getting dressed if he could avoid it. Case in point, he was wearing yesterday's sweats and a stained shirt. "She's not the boss of you."

I blew my bangs out of my eyes and eyed the good china on the counter. “Spoken like a true sixteen-year-old.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, because you’re so worldly at twenty-one. Didn’t Natalie say you were welcome any time?”

I glared at him as I set out chopped veggies. “Yes, but I can’t leave the country without telling Mother and Dad. It’s bad enough I’m using my school money to go to India, but you know Mother is going to have one of her episodes as soon as she finds out who I’m staying with.”

Josh snagged a bite of red pepper before I could smack his hand. “Whatever dude, it’s your future. I don’t see why you don’t just do what you want. Sell your paintings, get your art degree, and move to some hippy community in California.”

“That is *not* what I want. Besides, nobody will buy my paintings, and I don’t blame them. They’re boring. My art teachers all say my technique is good but my perspective is too vanilla. They want edgy and different. How am I supposed to sell paintings that even I don’t like?”

Josh shrugged. “Craigslist?”

“You are no help at all.”

“But you’re going to miss me anyway.”

I ignored him as I finished setting the table. Josh poured himself a big glass of milk and grabbed another chunk of red pepper as he sat down. Mother would never have let me come to brunch in sweats and a t-shirt, but he was the baby and the only boy. As long as he played football, he’d be allowed to do whatever he wanted. The antebellum

rules my mother lived by were a lot more lenient for boys than for girls.

The scent of gardenias preceded my mother into the room and my father followed, as always. They certainly looked the part of cool sophistication and warm indulgence. Mother's hair was pulled back into a twist, her pearls matched the casual elegance of the dining room, and her smile didn't really reach her eyes. Dad's tousled hair and seersucker suit made him look like the plantation owner his grand-daddy used to be, and he winked at me as he settled Mother into her chair.

She smoothed a linen napkin in her lap as Dad took his seat. "Madeline and the boys couldn't make it today due to a charity function, but she sends her regards. Joshua, please say grace."

I bowed my head, thankful that Madeline wouldn't be there. My older sister was my mother's pride and joy, the perfect Southern lady, and I could only tolerate a few minutes in her presence before I wanted to strangle her. My heart was pounding as Josh said amen and started loading his plate with quiche, home fries, and raw vegetables.

The clink of silverware on dishes filled the silence while we ate. The food smelled delicious but I couldn't taste anything past my anxiety. It was a miracle I didn't pass right out when Josh started humming "Leaving on a Jet Plane." It didn't last long before Mother put a stop to his shenanigans.

"Joshua, polite young men do not hum at the table." She dabbed her napkin at the corner of her mouth, folded her hands in her lap, and turned to me. "Samantha, is there something you'd like to tell us?"

My mouth went suddenly dry, and I couldn't find the words that had come so

easily before. “Why do you ask that?”

“When I tried to pay your fall tuition, the university informed me that you’d taken the semester off. I told them they must have been mistaken, but the woman seemed very sure of herself.”

I clenched my hands together under the table and took a deep breath before answering. “I did. I’m going to India.”

Mother waved away my comment and picked up her fork again. “That’s ridiculous, dear. I think it’s a good idea to take some time off from school to revive your social obligations, but it isn’t the right season for traveling.”

I blinked, unsure that I’d heard her correctly. “I’m not taking time off of school to visit the country club. I’m going to spend three months in India with Natalie.”

Everyone stopped eating. Josh stared down at his empty plate, Dad fiddled with his napkin, and Mother put her fork down with more force than necessary. “You will absolutely not go to India to spend time with Natalie. Lord only knows what she’s involved with in that heathen place.”

“She’s not—“

“I forbid it. Natalie is just like her mother, bless her heart. Your Aunt Kitty couldn’t find a good man with a Bible and directions from God. She was nothing but trouble from the first, and Natalie has followed in her footsteps.”

I clenched my jaw shut for a moment to keep from spilling how I really felt about her narrow-mindedness. “This isn’t about Aunt Kitty, and this isn’t about finding a husband. Natalie is teaching English to kids in India. She loves it there, and she invited

me to stay for as long as I'd like."

Mother's face crumpled and she started fanning herself with her napkin, but the calculating gleam never left her eyes. "I believe I'm on the verge of one of my episodes, perhaps we could discuss this later, dear?"

I glanced at Josh and Dad, who were both trying very hard to become invisible. "We can if you'd like, but I'm leaving tomorrow. I'll be there for three months."

"Tomorrow? But what about the Winter Ball? You're needed on the committee." The hint of panic in her voice was almost my undoing. Mother didn't panic.

I reached for her hand intending to soften the blow. "I'm sure they'll get along without—"

"This is Natalie's doing. She's always been a bad influence on you." She pushed back from the table before I could make contact. "Don't expect a penny from us as long as you're turning your back on the family."

Dad stood as she breezed past him, but she shook her head and he sank back into his seat. Mother was well-known for her exits. And her episodes. And using her powers of persuasion to force everyone around her to do her bidding.

I closed my eyes and covered my face with my hands. It was about what I'd expected, but the wrenching guilt was never easy. I could never tell if Mother truly believed what she said, but there was no mistaking that she was hurt that I'd leave the nest like this.

Dad cleared his throat and I looked up. He smiled at me and patted my hand. "Don't worry, honey. She'll be fine once she's rested some."

Josh snorted as he loaded his plate for a second round.

I grabbed my dad's hand where it rested on mine. The papery skin surprised me. He was always a big, strong presence in my mind. "I'm sorry I had to tell you this way. I just...I just can't stay here."

"I understand. Madeline always wanted exactly what your mother wanted for her, but you always wanted more. You take after my side of the family. Now about India, have you thought this through completely? What are you going to do there? How are you planning to pay for it?"

I slid my hand away from his. "I've been saving up a bit, and I used my room and board money on the plane ticket. I don't have much, but I can make it work."

Dad straightened in his chair. "Nonsense. No daughter of mine is going to make things work. I'm not going to go against your mother, but I think I can come up with a solution that makes everyone happy."

Josh piped up, mid-chew. "You're going to have her committed?"

Dad glared at him right along with me. "Your mother is not crazy. And don't speak with your mouth full." He switched his attention to me. "As for you, your mother and I would like to see you provided for."

I felt my hackles rising again. "I can provide for myself."

"Don't interrupt. We'll pay for you to spend three months in India as long as you agree to add a teaching certificate to your degree when you get back." He held up his hand before I could protest. "I know it's not what you want, but there's no guarantee that your art degree will be able to support you. Your mother wants you to find a husband to

do that, but she's willing to accept a teaching degree as a secondary choice."

I looked at Josh across the table, but he wouldn't meet my eyes. It was an old battle between us. I'd had to fight for the two years of art school I'd already completed, and he had free rein to go to any school he chose. On top of that, Mother was constantly parading me around like breeding stock, but I suspected that if I left she'd have no choice but to start grooming Josh.

In exchange for a teaching degree, I could get some experience that would only improve my art. I could take risks and break free of the Cinderella nightmare, at least for a little while.

I met Dad's eyes and nodded. "Okay. You pay my expenses for India, and I'll double major."

His smile took over his whole face. "Good. We'll take care of the paperwork tonight. Do you have everything you need for your trip? I'll have the driver pick you up tomorrow and take you to the airport."

I nodded again and picked at the cold food on my plate. A shiver of fear raced across my back. Mother had been trying for two years to force me into teaching, and I'd just taken the first step down her path. I'd planned to handle the whole trip myself, but I knew I didn't have enough money if I wanted to keep my apartment. I drew the line at moving back in with my parents. Natalie had offered to take up some of my slack, but there was no way to know if it would be enough. With my parents paying my way, I wouldn't be a burden on her, but I wondered how much freedom I'd just given up by agreeing to the deal.

We finished eating while Josh gave us a play by play of his latest video game conquest. I promised to come back that evening to sign the paperwork for school. As expected, Mother did not return to the table.

The next day I sat on a plane bound for Delhi as the flight attendants prepared us for takeoff. Dad had insisted on shipping a couple of boxes of stuff he'd deemed necessities to Natalie's place, so I was taking my first real steps to adventure under my father's watchful eye. He'd also upgraded my phone account to unlimited international calling. Something about Mother needing to be able to reach me at all times.

I eyed the phone in my hand and considered "accidentally" leaving it on the plane. Even I wasn't that spoiled. I could always forget to charge it when I got there. The last time I'd talked to Natalie had been through an email the previous week right after I'd sent her my flight information. She'd said to call when I boarded my plane, but my last three calls had gone straight to voicemail.

Unease skittered down my spine as I powered down my phone. We'd talked a lot about me coming for a visit, but she hadn't shared many details. I adjusted the yoga pants and tank top I'd gleefully donned that morning. Mother would have needed the smelling salts if she'd seen what I was wearing, but the rebellion seemed pathetic now that the plane was about to take off. Who cared what Mother's reaction would have been? I was comfortable for the eighteen hour flight, and no one on the plane cared that I wasn't appropriately dressed for jet setting. I had a sweater I could put over the tank top when I got there, and Natalie would meet me at baggage claim.

I slept most of the flight with my head tilted at an odd angle, so I left the plane

with quite a headache. The airport looked like every other airport I'd ever been in at first. I followed the other passengers through customs to baggage claim, but I didn't see Natalie's red hair anywhere. There was a delay with the bags, so I settled onto a bench within viewing distance of the carousel to wait.

No one paid me any attention, so I watched the people moving around gathering their bags. There was no signal on my phone, so I used it as a camera to document my first moments in India. I wasn't skilled in photography by any means, but I tried to get some good shots of the colorful *saris* gathered around me.

I was framing up a man with a bright blue turban when I noticed the uniformed guards just past him. There were two of them in green camouflage gear with berets. Automatic weapons were slung across their backs, and they each had a German shepherd on a leash. The shutter noise from my phone seemed suddenly very loud as I snapped the picture.

The one closest to me gestured in my direction as I watched. His partner said something to him, and they started walking toward me. I put my phone down and tried not to panic. Maybe they were just coming over to offer their help. The crowd had thinned quite a bit at that point, so it didn't take them long to reach me.

The one who approached me had a thin mustache and bad acne scars. "Madam, no pictures." He pointed at my phone. "No pictures."

My hands were clammy, so I rubbed them on my yoga pants as I looked up at him. "Okay, I'm sorry. I didn't realize it wasn't allowed."

He nodded his head, and then both of them went back to their patrolling. I

released the breath I'd been holding and picked my phone up again. I'd never felt so powerless, not even in the face of my parents. Those guards could have done anything with me, and I wouldn't have been able to stop it.

I looked around again and noticed that there weren't any women alone in the airport. It could have just been a coincidence, but I didn't think so. Natalie had warned me that India could be dangerous for women. Why wasn't she waiting in baggage claim like she'd promised?

My phone vibrated in my hand. The signal had returned, and I had two voicemails. I shook my head and called up the messages.

"Hey Sam, it's me. Some things have come up and I'm not sure it's a good time for you to come out just now. Call me when you get this and we can talk more." I pulled the phone away from my ear and checked the timestamp. Natalie had called twenty minutes into my flight to tell me not to come. Mother had warned me she was irresponsible, but this seemed a little much. The second message was also from Natalie a couple of hours later.

"Hey Sam. You can forget that last message. I got everything handled. I know you're coming in today, but I'm not going to be able to make it to the airport to pick you up. Your flight is supposed to land around four, so you have plenty of time to get a taxi before it gets dark. Remember what I said about wandering around alone at night...don't. I'll see you when you get here. Yay!" The second message sounded much more like Natalie, though it still left me in a bad situation. My flight had been delayed in Frankfurt, so I was four hours late.

The sun had set an hour ago, and I was going to have to find my own way to Natalie's apartment on the other side of Delhi.

I wasn't even sure what was involved in getting a taxi. People in the movies just stood at the curb and put their hands up, so I supposed I could try that. I decided to wait until I was at Natalie's apartment to call my parents. Mother would be horrified if she knew I planned to take a taxi into a foreign city at night. She was horrified by a lot of things, Natalie and her family included. I hadn't seen any of them in almost six years, but the girl I remembered wouldn't leave someone hanging without a good reason. I wondered what had come up that was serious enough to warrant me postponing my trip. I stowed my phone and stretched, trying to relieve my headache a little bit. A few minutes later, I grabbed my bags and made my way to the exit.

Two steps beyond the sliding doors, I was surrounded by a group of swarthy men yelling "madam" with outstretched hands. The smell of burnt curry made my eyes water as one of the men grabbed my arm. In the dim garage light, I could see his clothes were sweat stained and dirty, and the teeth that weren't dark yellow were missing entirely. Natalie's warning came rushing back to me, and I jerked away hard enough to trip over my suitcases. I caught myself before I fell, but two other men joined the one who had grabbed me.

They were motioning me forward and pointing at little car-motorcycle things across the street. Each one had three wheels, a green body, and yellow canvas stretched to form the top. A bit of red Christmas garland hung from most of the side mirrors. The street between me and the vehicles was a blur of constant motion. Cars announced their

presence with quick little honks, and motorcycles slalomed through them past the slower-moving bikes.

None of the men attempted to touch me again, but I decided that the nice guards with the big guns inside were a safer bet. I hurried back through the doors and watched one of the men capture another hapless tourist. He managed to pull the pale guy all the way to the vehicle he'd pointed at without getting hit by anything.

I could admit that I'd panicked, but I had no urge to be grabbed again any time soon.

After the chaos outside, I wasn't surprised to find a blob-like line at the taxi stand. I stood out of the way watching as a woman in a burgundy pajama suit walked right up to the window, completely ignoring all the people chattering around her. A few non-Indian stragglers approached the back of the blob, but couldn't seem to figure out where to stand. I moved forward to join the throng and lined up behind the other confused white people. How did Natalie handle this every day? Despite the relative coolness of the building, I was sweating hard in the small crush of people.

After a few minutes of the line not moving, I shuffled forward between people until I was standing at the window in front of a bored clerk in a polo shirt. No one seemed to care.

"I need a taxi, please?" I wasn't sure why that came out as a question, but the guy immediately pulled out a big green book.

"What is your good name?" His English was heavily accented, but I could understand him.

"Um, Samantha Barnes?" For someone who blithely traveled to a country on the other side of the world by herself, I sounded really unsure of myself. I realized I was hunching and quickly straightened my spine.

"Destination?"

"Number 319, Ashoka Park Road, Friends Colony East." I'd made the choice to come to India and no amount of grabby drivers or blob lines or mysterious requests from Natalie were going to get me to give up and go home.

The clerk flipped the book around, handed me his pen, and pointed to a blank spot on the page. The spots above it looked like signatures, so I signed my name. He took his pen back and slid a slip of paper across the counter. The slip had 245 written on it and nothing else. I glanced up to ask what I was supposed to do with it, but the clerk was already talking to someone else next to me.

I stuck my slip in the side pocket of my backpack and shoved my way through the blob to open air. The guards strolled past me again without a second glance. I wondered if they were there to keep people safe or enforce the airport rules about pictures and loading zones.

I followed the taxi signs to a set of doors around the corner from the overzealous guys outside. There was no one in this little alcove except another bored young man in a polo shirt sitting at a desk. I handed him my slip, and he made a call to someone in Hindi. The whole process seemed complicated to me, but the closest I'd ever come to a taxi was almost getting hit by Aunt Kitty's ex-boyfriend one Thanksgiving. The valet pointed to the sign by the curb proclaiming it a waiting zone. He didn't say anything, just

went back to hitting buttons on his cell phone.

A white taxi pulled up and the driver hopped out to open the door for me. I settled against the cotton-covered seats and closed my eyes. The car bounced as my suitcases landed in the trunk and the lid closed with a thud. This was more like what I was used to. My parents had a driver on call for special occasions. The tension in my neck started to relax as the car moved forward.

My shirt had started to stick to my sweaty back, but the air conditioning soon cooled me down. I didn't even know if Natalie had a car of her own. Probably not, since she'd made a comment once about riding the metro. I was so tired from the erratic sleep I'd gotten on the plane. The attendants kept trying to feed me every time I fell asleep.

A sudden stop had my eyes flying open. We were surrounded by cars, trucks, and those little green and yellow deathtraps on all sides, honking at each other. Traffic snarled all around us. I couldn't identify any kind of order to the chaos; everyone wanted to go in different directions at the same time. The tension in my neck came back with a vengeance, and I considered calling Natalie just to yell at her for abandoning me.

We inched forward until we were through the worst of it, but we couldn't go very fast because of huge speed humps, random suicidal pedestrians, and almost constant people cutting us off. It looked like we were driving through neighborhood after neighborhood of squished together houses and big trees, and they all looked the same in the dark.

It didn't take much longer to turn into a quieter residential street. The incessant honking on the main road was muffled by the multi-level houses crowded together along

the street. I became uneasy when I didn't see any apartment complexes. I'd trusted that the driver was taking me to the address I'd given the clerk, but how would I know?

Natalie had said she shared a two-bedroom apartment with her best friend, who worked at the school with her.

There were no street lights, but most of the houses were lit from within. The headlights washed over a tall wooden fence with dark metal scrollwork at the top as we turned into a driveway. My heart sped up as we stopped. A guard sat in a plastic chair next to the gate, and the driver exchanged a few words with him before he rolled the gate open.

*{ out of the frying pan, into the sauna }*

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2

My first glimpse of my temporary home was both terrifying and exhilarating. Terrifying because I couldn't see much of the dark courtyard beyond that there were a couple of large trees shading the entire area, and exhilarating because my journey was over, for better or worse. A stone path led from the driveway to a short set of steps up to a metal storm door. The inside door was either open or non-existent because I could see the corner of a table with a lamp on it from where I was sitting in my taxi. It didn't look like the apartment Natalie had described, but it didn't look dangerous beyond the shadows either.

The driver opened my door, then pulled my suitcases from the trunk. He stacked them neatly by the steps and named an obscene amount of rupees without so much as a smile. Looked like Dad was right in insisting I exchange some cash before I left the States. Despite being nighttime in India, the heat smacked me in the face the second I left the relatively cool confines of the car. I'd grown up in Texas; I was no stranger to

heat or humidity. I'd just never experienced them teamed up in quite that way before. It was like trying to breathe through a quilt.

I handed over the amount without arguing because I wasn't sure it would do any good. He quickly backed out into the street and disappeared. It was at that point that I thought to check the address. My brain was starting to feel fuzzy from lack of sleep and the constant adrenaline rushes I was getting from fear, but I trudged back out to the street to peer at the gate. I couldn't find an address anywhere, which was not reassuring. The guard watched me with a blank expression.

"Madam?"

"Is this 319 Ashoka Park Road?"

He moved his head in a slow lefty nod. It could have been a yes or it could have been confusion. I decided my best bet was to just knock on the door and see what happened. Natalie had just called, so it wasn't like I'd be surprising her.

The gate closed with a clang behind me as I wrestled my suitcases up the steps. For the amount of money I'd paid the driver, he should have brought my stuff inside and announced my presence royal ball style. I grunted and managed to roll my suitcases forward while simultaneously holding the door open and not falling off the steps. Considering I was having trouble keeping my eyes open, I was pretty proud of myself.

The door opened into a living room decorated in college shabby chic, including a side table, a couch, and a coffee table, none of which matched. In the center of the room was the ugliest couch I'd ever seen, covered in large scale fuchsia and violet flowers.

Opposite the couch on the wall was a giant flat panel TV with wires trailing from

it to a jumble of electronic boxes that I didn't recognize. The only other thing in the room was a shiny white elephant the size of a toaster sitting on the side table across the couch from me. It wasn't in the normal elephant pose on four legs, instead sitting upright on its butt like a toddler.

Two closed doors led out of the living room and directly across from my position at the front door was an archway with a beaded curtain that unfortunately matched the couch. I could see peeks of some kind of stainless steel appliance through the curtain. Natalie had described her apartment as cozy, and really, I should have known better. Maybe this was why she'd tried to get me to change my mind at the last minute. Lord knows I'd have been embarrassed by the couch alone.

"Hello?" I was almost certain someone was home because the door was open, but maybe that was normal for India. I was getting a bad feeling that I was wandering around an empty apartment.

The closest door to my right had a whiteboard stuck to it like a dorm room. Someone had scrawled "that's what she said" across it in red ink. The other door further into the room had another whiteboard with something written on it. I couldn't make it out, so I moved forward to get a closer look.

The beads tinkled as a slight breeze moved through the room, bringing the scent of plumeria. There must have been some growing in the courtyard. I had drawn even with the white elephant and the second door when it opened.

A man with a ratty towel around his waist and another over his head stepped through and ran right into me. I squealed and he shouted something unintelligible. The

force of his movement knocked me off balance, so my arms flew out to try to keep me upright. He grabbed my shoulder with his free hand. My brain interpreted this as a threat, so in response, I shoved him in the chest as hard as I could.

It wasn't exactly a graceful maneuver but my tiredness was distracting me from my natural ninja-like self-defense skills. The towel on his head hit the ground first. His eyes went wide as he lost his grip and tumbled backward. He managed to avoid landing on the side table, but his towel snagged the elephant's ear on the way down. Towel, man, and elephant all went down with a crash.

I clapped both hands over my mouth as I realized I'd just assaulted him in what was probably his home. Shards of white elephant were scattered around the living room, and the guy was trying to ease himself off of his back. He winced and rubbed the back of his head. I could see smears of blood on the floor near his arm where he'd landed on the remnants.

"I'm so sorry. Don't move for a second, and I'll clear you a safe zone."

He looked up at me for the first time since the door opened, and I realized his eyes were really green. Like leaves on a summer day, completely saturated green. It was unnatural. He must have been wearing contacts.

"I hope you're Samantha and not some crazy home invader with a grudge against tacky knick knacks."

I nodded. "In my defense, I wasn't expecting someone to come charging out and body tackle me."

"I may be concussed, but I don't seem to remember that as how it went down."

Up until that point, I'd managed to avoid looking below his shoulders. Green eyes and dark blonde hair that hung in shaggy waves to his chin gave way to lean muscle and tanned skin. He was sprawled out on his back, and the ratty blue towel he'd been wearing was twisted next to his waist on the floor. I leaned down to grab the towel at the same time that he sat up. We narrowly avoided having our heads collide, but I found my face inches from his as we both pulled on the towel.

He smiled, and my brain finally started functioning again. I closed my eyes, relinquished my grip on the towel, and sat back. He knew my name, which meant I was at the right house. Natalie's roommate and best friend was a guy, something else she'd failed to mention. I was mortified at the first impression I was making, but I couldn't seem to stop making a fool of myself.

"Alright, I'm decent...well, I'm covered at least."

I didn't open my eyes. "I really am sorry. You surprised me and I've been grabbed enough already and Natalie abandoned me and I'm so tired." The urge to just lie down and take a little nap among the glass shards was strong.

"C'mon." He tucked a hand under my elbow and heaved me up. "Open your eyes."

I obeyed. He was standing right in front of me, his hand on my arm, and I felt a flush start creeping up my neck. "Isn't this how we started?"

He chuckled and opened his mouth to say something, but the screen door creaked behind us. We both turned to watch as a short, skinny woman with long red hair and a paper bag cradled in her arm stepped into the room. I didn't recognize her at first.

The Natalie I remembered was round. As a teenager, she'd had curves bordering on pudgy. Mother had said she'd only gotten bigger in college. The woman in front of me was slim and toned with an angular face.

"Natalie?"

She looked from me to Nick and grinned slowly. I'd actually forgotten about the attractive, mostly naked guy standing inches away from me. I stepped away, and he dropped his hand.

"Hey Sam. I see you've already met Nick." She moved forward and gave me an awkward one-armed hug. I wasn't used to public displays of affection, so I was a bit too slow in returning it. "Everything okay? Looks like you got here just fine." She pulled back and peered into my face.

"You look amazing, Nat." I sounded strangled, but I couldn't figure out a polite way to ask where the rest of her had gone.

She laughed and patted my arm. "Give me a sec and I'll tell you the whole story." She breezed past Nick through the beaded curtain and kept talking. "I was planning to hang out here until you arrived, but I realized we were out of some things. It's easier to get groceries late at night right before the store closes, so I took a chance. I knew Nick was here anyway."

Nick hadn't moved, and he was rubbing the back of his head again. She hadn't noticed the shattered elephant all over the living room.

"Natalie? Was that elephant in here yours?"

"Not really, I sort of adopted it when I moved in. Why?"

I glanced at Nick who met my eyes and raised an eyebrow. "There was an accident and..."

Nick interrupted before I could confess. "I broke it." He looked away and moved to peek through the beads. "Sorry, Nat."

Natalie laughed, and I heard her rummaging through a cupboard. "Mhmm. Better clean it up then." She pushed through the beads again and handed him a broom and dustpan before disappearing back into the kitchen.

Nick handed them to me, mumbled a good night, and retreated into his room. I was getting the short end of the deal, but it was partially my fault. It was easier to just clean the floor than demand Nick come back out and help. The worst of the damage seemed to be between the table and the beaded curtain, and the lack of a rug in the living room made it easy to sweep up the mess. Natalie hadn't returned by the time I was finished, so I followed her into the other room.

The beads parted to reveal a narrow galley kitchen with cabinets and counters on both sides. The refrigerator was next to me as I stepped into the room, and the sink was on the other side. Natalie was standing at an open cabinet putting away her groceries at the end of the aisle.

"Natalie? Where's the trash can?"

She gestured behind her without turning around. "Under the sink. Be careful, the door is ornery and likes to fall off on unsuspecting toes."

I smiled, despite feeling incredibly self-conscious. I wasn't sure how to act around her knowing that I'd essentially followed Mother's lead in ignoring her for all

those years. Was I supposed to apologize? It hadn't come up in the sparse emails of the last couple of months, and I didn't want her to think I blindly believed Mother's nonsense.

The door posed no problem as I got rid of the glass. I searched through the cabinets until I found one that looked like it housed cleaning supplies and shoved the broom and dustpan in there.

Natalie closed the cabinet as I did and turned to lean against the sink. "Ready to see our room?"

She didn't wait for an answer, just led me back into the living room and through the first door with the red writing on it. The room was big enough to handle two twin beds, two desks, and a large built-in set of cabinets, but not much else. There was one window directly across from the door draped with a thick red fabric.

I stood in the doorway as Natalie sank onto the bed to the left. Her side of the room had piles of clothes all over the floor and papers scattered haphazardly on the desk and chair. Three paperback books were stacked precariously on the floor next to her bed where a nightstand would usually go. The beds looked like basic platform beds with mattresses on top.

The other side of the room was bare save for the furniture. With no bedding, I could see that the mattress was actually just a four inch futon pad that fit the wooden platform. It had two grey stains on it, and I wished I'd taken my mother's advice to pack sheets.

My regret must have been obvious because she got up and pulled something from

a pile near the foot of her bed.

"Here."

A wad of material hit me in the side. I picked it up to reveal a sheet with tiny blue flowers printed on it. I looked over, and this time, Natalie was sitting cross-legged on her bed and staring squarely at me.

I held the sheet up to my face and took a quick sniff. Fabric softener. I shut the door, sat on my bed, careful to avoid the stains, and clutched the sheet in my lap. "So."

Natalie smiled. "This is weird, right?"

I nodded, afraid of making it weirder with more words.

"Okay, first let me say I'm glad you're here. I missed you these last couple of years, and honestly, I've been a little scared of how much your mom would warp your personality without my influence."

I laughed. "I think that's what she was worried would happen with your influence."

"Of course she was. I was drawing out your natural awesome and she was intent on burying it."

I shrugged and looked down at my hands. That was how I thought of it most of the time, but it seemed different when Natalie said it, more cruel.

"It didn't sound like she succeeded in the emails, but you seem pretty cowed now."

I looked up at the challenge in her voice. "I have a tattoo."

"Oh yeah? Me too. But I bet mommy-dearest doesn't know about yours." She

held up a hand to stop my angry reply. “It doesn’t matter what happened, what she knows or doesn’t know. You’re here now, and there’s nothing she can do to stop me from corrupting you completely.”

“I’m not sure I want to be corrupted.”

She tilted her head, her face solemn. “You do or you wouldn’t be here. Your life was too vanilla. That’s what you told me. So let’s add some flavors.”

I got up and started tidying Natalie’s desk, unable to sit and have this conversation facing her. The only person I was comfortable sharing my uncensored opinion with was Josh, and that was mostly just insults.

She grinned slowly. “I bet you’d like a taste of Nick.”

My first thought was entirely inappropriate, so I went with the second. “How did you end up in India with him anyway?”

She patted the bed next to her. “Have a seat and I shall tell you a tale. Most of it will even be true, because we’re family and all.”

I set down the magazines I was straightening and perched on the end of her unmade bed. “Do you often embellish the truth when talking to people?” I hoped the disapproving tone in my head didn’t leak out my mouth.

“Only when it makes the story more fun. Nick and I met our freshman year of college. We were both interested in ESL, so we had a lot of classes together. I was fat and nerdy, he was skinny and nerdy, neither of us had any friends. We started studying together, then we started working out together. A couple of years later, I’ve lost the weight, and Nick’s gained the muscle. I convinced him to get contacts instead of his

glasses, though now I'm rethinking that decision."

"I knew his eyes couldn't really be that color."

Natalie patted my arm again. I'd moved closer and gotten comfortable on the bed without realizing it. "Sorry babe, those really are his eyes. He wears clear contacts."

I groaned and leaned back against the wall.

"Anyway, when we graduated, we joined this program called Tyler Sister Cities. They place people all over the world in ESL positions. We convinced them to send us both to India, and here we are."

It all sounded pretty straightforward, so I wondered which part of that she'd embellished. "Do you work at the same school?"

"Yeah, and I've been meaning to talk to you about that. I have this student, Abishek. It's his last year, and he really wants to improve his slang. His English is fine, but the more American you sound here, the higher your status. I want you to spend time with him for a couple of hours during the day."

I shook my head. "I don't know anything about teaching English."

"You don't have to do anything special, just chat with him. He's assigned to my language lab from eight to noon as an assistant. I usually leave at one or two, so I figured you'd leave with me, hang with Abishek, work on your art, then we come home."

I was suddenly uncomfortable again. I wanted to say no, but it wasn't a lot to ask when she was letting me stay at her place for free. "Are you sure you want me doing this? I'm not that good at talking with people I don't know."

"I'm sure. He's more outgoing than most Indian guys, so you shouldn't have a

problem. If nothing else, just tell him about your mom. You have plenty to talk about there.”

I had no intention of sharing my family issues with one of Natalie’s students, but it wouldn’t hurt to get to know someone outside my sphere of influence. Maybe he could tell me some good places to sketch. “Okay.”

“Great. You start tomorrow. I’ll bet you’re tired after that flight, and I know I am after battling for groceries, so we should probably get some sleep.”

I scrambled off her bed as she pulled a sheet out from under me. My mind felt a bit slower than usual, but I was still able to work out the timing of Natalie’s day without trouble. If she got off work at two, and she’d had enough free time to go to the grocery store, why couldn’t she meet me at the airport like she’d promised? And what had come up that was serious enough for me to stay home?

“Natalie?”

“Hmm?” Her head was shoved into a pillow facing the wall, and I almost changed my mind about asking her. Even then, I chickened out and asked the easier question.

“What were you doing this afternoon?”

She hesitated. “Late meeting at the school. Couldn’t get out of it. Sorry.”

I stared at the back of her head and wondered if she’d just embellished the truth to me. It was a good enough excuse as any.

I picked up the sheet I’d discarded when I’d had the sudden urge to clean the room. It didn’t have elastic corners to make it tight, so I just draped it over the mattress.

There was no pillow or blanket, but it was warm in the room anyway. Now that Natalie wasn't keeping my attention, jet lag was starting to set in. I was too tired to retrieve my stuff from the living room, so I turned off the overhead light, shimmied out of my yoga pants, and folded them neatly over my desk chair.

Natalie probably wouldn't care that I was sleeping on top of the sheet in my lacy travel underwear and a tank top, so I laid down face-first on the bed. It was hard and musty, like sleeping on the floor in Aunt Kitty's rec room. I turned my face toward the wall and tried to will myself to sleep.

I must have succeeded because the next moment when I opened my eyes I was sideways on the bed and marinating in my own sweat. I pulled my arm up so I could read the illuminated face of my watch. 2:47. I'd slept for just over three hours.

My eyes were scratchy, my headache was back, and I had to pee something fierce. I'd neglected to ask where the bathroom was during my impromptu orientation the night before. I could hear Natalie breathing across the room, and I wondered how she dealt with the heat.

The sheet she'd lent me was soaked, as was my tank top. I needed my suitcases and a toilet before I could get back to sleep. Sweat dripped down my back, and I added a shower to my list of needs.

My back popped as I twisted out of bed, and I wondered how much it would cost to get a real mattress. Natalie didn't stir as I opened the door and crept into the living room. I was well aware of the fact that my tank top was stuck to me and probably transparent, not to mention I wasn't wearing pants of any kind. It was just this kind of

situation in which Nick would stumble upon me in the dark, literally, I hoped. I let that image sink in for a moment, then shook my head. I felt disgusting, and the last thing I wanted was someone else's body heat adding to my own.

My luggage was still sitting by the door where I'd left it, and the door was still open. I turned the handle for the screen, but someone had locked it, thank goodness. I pulled out clean undies, a tank top, and a pair of pajama shorts. The sweat was starting to dry on my skin from the tiny breeze coming through the screen door, so I decided that was good enough until it was light.

I could search for a shower later, but the need for a toilet was becoming desperate. A quick scan of the room in the dim light from outside didn't reveal anything new in the way of bathrooms. There had to be a powder room or something. I turned around and moved the heavy wooden door away from the wall. Eureka, a hidden door. It opened to a little room completely covered in dark green marble. A small window above the toilet gave off just enough light for me to see.

The toilet seemed clean and functional, so I took care of business and washed my hands. The water was lukewarm despite me turning the cold tap, but it felt so good that I splashed some on my face and chest. Another ratty towel was hanging next to the door on a hook, so I dried off and changed into my clean clothes.

I had two choices. I could go back into the sauna that was my bedroom, or I could try to crash on the couch and hope the breeze kept me from losing another ten pounds in water weight. I walked out of the bathroom and my hair brushed against my cheek in the meager draft. The couch it was.

I discovered that if I couldn't see the disaster of the fabric, it was a really comfortable couch. The material was soft against my skin and the cushions offered just enough support. Best of all, it didn't try to suck me into the crevice like most couches did.

My body relaxed, and my mind drifted to home. My apartment back in Austin had a couch like this monstrosity. Instead of ugly flowers, my cat had shredded the leather on the sides beyond recognition, but it was still perfectly comfortable. Dad had agreed to take Loki while I was gone, and I wondered how Mother was faring with pet hair all over her pristine house.

I missed the feel of my cat curled up next to my legs when I napped. I wanted the gentle vibrations of his purring that preceded the surprise attack on my knees. Homesickness made me start to tear up, but I rolled over to my stomach and refused to let them fall. India was my idea, and I was following through.

My eyes closed, but before I could fall asleep again, I heard music coming through the open bedroom door. I sat up thinking it was my phone, but the song was wrong. The music abruptly stopped, and I heard Natalie's groggy voice.

“Why are you calling me so late?”

There was a pause and then a thump. “I'm in bed. I told you my cousin was coming in today.”

Another pause. “I changed my mind. She's not the suspicious type and she's preoccupied with her own problems. It should be fine.”

She sighed. “No, I think she's sleeping in the living room. Look, I don't want to

discuss this now. Let me know when the next one is planned and I'll be there. And please don't call me in the middle of the night." There was some grumbling then silence.

I ran my hand through my damp hair. Part of me felt guilty for eavesdropping, but a bigger part was worried about what I'd gotten myself into. A few emails and some good childhood memories didn't make a person trustworthy. There could be a reasonable explanation for what I'd overheard. Just because she was talking about me didn't make it something bad.

I tasted blood and realized I'd been chewing on my lips again. It was a terrible habit I thought I'd broken years ago. I laid down as quietly as I could and went back and forth about confronting Natalie. She seemed like the cousin I'd known and loved. Except for the parts where she tried to get me to stay home, flaked out on picking me up, and told me that she wanted to get me into trouble. With her roommate. An image of Nick smiling at me in his towel appeared helpfully in my mind. I got warm again and wondered if the trouble might be worth it. The intermittent breeze couldn't keep up with my hormones, and I started to sweat again. It was that reaction that had me reconsidering going home.

If I left, I wouldn't have to fulfill my end of the deal, but I'd also be proving that I couldn't handle anything outside the bubble my parents had lovingly put me in. I'd never have experiences that mattered, and my art would never grow. On the other hand, I would never be arrested in a foreign country, which was a pretty powerful motivator. Anxiety tightened the muscles at the back of my neck, and I went with my usual decision: avoidance and procrastination. I'd deal with it in the morning.

I dropped into sleep with a pounding head and the taste of salt and copper in my mouth.

*{ keep your friends close }*

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3

It was the squeal that woke me up.

"Nick! There's a strange person sleeping on your couch."

My face was shoved into a pillow that hadn't been there the night before. It smelled like summer, as if someone had left it in a patch of sun until it aged to warm squishy perfection. I breathed in deep and cracked an eye open.

"Oh goodness, you're awake." There was a perky brunette wearing a pencil skirt and stiletto heels standing by my feet.

"Mmbrph." I closed my eye and turned my head toward the back of the couch.

"What on God's green earth are you wearing? And why are you on Nick's couch?"

I considered snoring for her benefit, but that seemed rude. She sounded like a friend of Nick's, and though I was not a morning person, I was a guest. I sat up and swung my legs to the floor, then pushed my hands through my hair. It felt more like a

rat's nest than the chin-length bob I usually favored.

"Do you even speak English?" Her hands were on her hips, and she looked put out that she might have to deal with a pesky foreigner.

I yawned and stretched my arms above my head, using it to give my brain a few more seconds to engage. The newcomer was about my height with a curvy body she was showing off in that skin tight skirt and a sleeveless blouse the color of ripe watermelon. What was with all the pink? Her long, dark hair was pulled back by some kind of clip, and she wore smoky eye makeup at way-too-damn-early in the morning.

She arched an eyebrow. "Do I need to call the police?"

"Who are you?" I'd intended that to come out a bit more polite, but she wasn't making a lot of effort either.

She tossed her hair behind her shoulder and glared at me. "I'm Maggie Gannon, a close friend of Nick's. Who are you?"

I extended my arm out of habit. "Nice to meet you, Maggie. I'm Sam, Natalie's cousin. I live here now."

She shook my hand with her fingertips. "Really. The least Natalie could do was ask if her cousin could move in." The glare transferred to my now-closed bedroom door.

I rolled my eyes while she wasn't looking. It was entirely possible that Natalie hadn't asked, but Nick didn't seem to care that I was here. Roommate drama was the last thing I wanted to get in the middle of.

I picked up the mystery pillow and settled it in my lap. I could lean my chin on it and still watch Nick's close friend for signs of crazy. My roommate in college had been

crazy, but she'd hidden it really well until mid-terms. Turns out both roommates are responsible if a fire is set, and the school doesn't look kindly on a request to personally screen any subsequent roommates. That was when Dad insisted I get my own apartment.

Maggie's eyes shifted to the pillow I was cuddling, and her tone moved from chilly to outright hostile. "Where did you get that?"

I shrugged. "It just appeared while I was sleeping."

"This is not the time for sarcastic comments." Maggie had her hands on her hips, and what looked like genuine anger in her eyes about me having a pillow. And there went the crazy.

"When exactly is the time for sarcastic comments? I'd like to sleep until then." Apparently, my brain to mouth politeness filter had yet to engage. She did not look amused. "I don't know where the pillow came from. I slept on the couch last night because I was hot, and it was under me when I woke up."

She snatched it away from me. "Fine. I'll return it to Nick then."

Understanding dawned like a brick to the face. "You and Nick, huh?"

She preened. "I don't want to start any rumors--"

Natalie interrupted her from behind me. "Then don't. Why don't you just run along to where you're welcome? God knows he only tolerates you out of pity." I craned my neck to look over the couch. She was standing in the doorway of our bedroom making shooing motions at Maggie. I hadn't heard the door open.

"You're so crude, Natalie. I don't know what you think I did to you, but maybe you should learn to act like an adult about it." Maggie turned on her stilettos and carried

the pillow into Nick's room. I squinted and could just make out Nick's full name written in swirly script on the door whiteboard.

Natalie flopped down on the couch next to me. "I'm proud of you for talking back to her. I was almost afraid you didn't have it in you anymore."

"She woke me up."

Natalie nodded sagely. "I made a voodoo doll of her once, don't ask how I got a bit of her hair, and threw it out into the courtyard. I'd hoped she'd be forced to stay out there, but her evil was too strong."

I narrowed my eyes at Natalie, maybe everyone here was crazy. "Did you give me a pillow last night?"

She stopped starrng intently at Nick's door and smiled at me. "Nick gave you his pillow last night?" She steepled her fingers together. "Excellent."

"You are strange. Are you sure we're related?"

"Yes, and as proof, I will make you Mom's blueberry pancake recipe."

Aunt Kitty made the best blueberry pancakes around. I used to stay over Friday nights just so I could have breakfast there until Mother declared their house off limits. My stomach growled, but I refused to let it distract me. "Why were you staring at Nick's door?"

"I was trying to use my Jedi powers to make her stub her toe on Nick's stupid huge bed."

I shook my head. "Strange and sinister."

She shrugged. "I wanted to work my way up to the force choke. Now, blueberry

pancakes. Huzzah!" She flounced into the kitchen, there was no other word for it, and I heard pots and pans clanking together.

I yawned again and recalled the weird phone call from the night before. It was hard to picture this upbeat Natalie as the same one who was talking about me just hours ago. My headache was gone, but remnants of the anxiety lingered. I raised my voice to be heard over Natalie's energetic cooking. Remembering my decision from the night before, I decided there was only one thing to be said. "You know Jedis don't force choke people, right?"

"A woman who knows Star Wars? Marry me. Marry me now."

I glanced over my shoulder at Nick as he lounged in his doorway. "You people all need to wear bells." I took in his plaid pajama bottoms and grey shirt. "At least you're clothed this time."

He moved forward to lean on the back of the couch, and I recognized the sunshine smell as it wafted toward me. Guess it was Nick's pillow after all.

"I've been trying to get Nat to watch the whole series for years, but she prefers blissful ignorance."

"Where's Maggie?"

"She needed to use my laptop really quick. Plus I think she's avoiding Nat."

A shout from the kitchen and a loud clang had us both looking toward the beaded curtain. "Should she be left alone in there? She's not going to burn Maggie in effigy is she?"

Nick laughed. "Don't say that in front of her. She hasn't tried that one yet, and I

don't want to give her any ideas."

Nick and I were grinning at each other, in a physically close but strictly platonic way, and Maggie chose that moment to emerge from his room. She shot me a dirty look, then smiled sweetly at Nick.

"I have your pillow, but you should probably wash it before you use it again. I noticed a strange smell coming from it." She didn't look at me, choosing to stare adoringly into Nick's eyes, but that was clearly a dig. Fair enough. At least I knew where I stood.

"I'm going to go help Natalie in the kitchen. Thanks for the pillow, Nick." I walked out without looking back.

Natalie had three plates on the counter stacked with golden brown pancakes. Butter was pooling on the plates, and my mouth watered. I'd skipped dinner last night, and as good as the food on the plane was I'd had trouble eating it due to the high level of spiciness.

I grabbed a fork sitting in a wire cup on the counter. "Can I take any of these plates?"

"Yeah, this one's almost done and we'll be good to go."

My stomach growled so I chose a plate and shoveled in some blueberry goodness. The pancakes were delicious, and I groaned in bliss. Natalie smirked at me, turned off the fire under the pan, and added the last pancake to the closest plate. She didn't bother cleaning anything, just grabbed two more forks and the other plates and walked into the living room. I debated staying in the kitchen because I could still hear Maggie's voice,

but that was too cowardly even for me.

I eased into the room. Nick was sitting in the spot I had vacated on the couch. He had his head down, ostensibly concentrating on the food in his lap. Maggie was cuddled up next to him, with one arm across the back of the couch, playing with the ends of his hair. It was a little bit creepy because Nick didn't really seem that into it. Natalie had claimed the other end of the couch and thrown her legs up on the coffee table.

Maybe it was my mother's insistence on a polite Southern upbringing, but it seemed a little petty for us all to be in here eating breakfast in front of Maggie without offering her anything. Damn my mother and her good manners.

"Maggie, can I get you anything?"

She didn't even look up. "No, thank you. I try not to eat my entire daily allowance of calories in one sitting, but thank you for asking."

Yep. My fat ass and I planned to enjoy those calories guilt-free now. Natalie shot me a look that clearly said "that's what happens when you're nice to her." I took an extra big bite of my pancake and willed her to shut up with her unspoken messages.

Natalie finished her food first, setting her plate on the coffee table next to her feet. "Sam's going to be working with me in the lab, so make sure you lock up when you leave, Nick." She stood up and stretched as she walked into our room. "I'm going to shower real fast then the bathroom's all yours."

Maggie looked at the plate Natalie had left on the coffee table and sighed. "How do you live with a slob for a roommate?"

I wasn't sure if she was talking to me or Nick, but he didn't respond either. The

influx of sugar and carbs helped my brain wake up a bit, and I noticed she didn't make any effort to put Natalie's plate in the kitchen. Without Natalie as a shield, I didn't have anywhere else to look except at Maggie trying to merge with Nick right there on the couch. I shoveled the rest of my pancakes in my mouth and escaped into the kitchen as fast as I could with my plate and Natalie's.

It was a mess in there. She'd left the pan cocked on the gas burner. Melted butter was congealing on the counter. There were errant blueberries all over the floor. Several big bowls had a thick batter layer covering the insides. It didn't take more than one bowl to make pancake batter, what in the name of God had Natalie been doing in there? I put the plates in the sink and wondered if I should do the dishes. I didn't want to set the precedent that I was willing to clean up after everyone, but I hated seeing a dirty kitchen. Really, I hated to see a dirty anything.

I shook my head and backed out of the room. Being the cleanest roommate was a vicious cycle that I'd lived before, and I had no interest in repeating it. Nick was just finishing his breakfast, and Maggie was still attached to his side like a lamprey. Nothing new to see there.

They ignored me as I snagged my suitcases and towed them into the bedroom. It looked the same as it had the night before, with the exception of the open bathroom door on my side of the room that I'd somehow missed. Did she always shower with the door open?

I stripped my bed of Natalie's soggy sheets and felt a little guilty about returning them in that state. Good manners demanded that I wash them before giving them back. I

sighed and threw them over my desk chair with my yoga pants. There had to be a washing machine somewhere nearby.

Since I hadn't expected to work on anything except my painting, I hadn't brought any professional clothing. I dug out a wrinkled volleyball tee-shirt and a pair of jeans that would have to do. I was just considering closing the bathroom door when Natalie stepped out of it wrapped in a towel.

"Rule number one: we only get hot water from 8:00 to 9:47 in the morning and from 10:15 to 11:30 at night."

I nodded. "That explains why Nick was showering so late last night."

Natalie started opening cabinets and pulling out clothes. "That and he wanted to smell nice when you got here."

"Why? He doesn't know me, and he seems really close to Maggie."

"Yeah, but Nick's the type of guy to want to make a good first impression. And despite Maggie's hopes and dreams, Nick isn't interested in her like that."

I shuddered. I didn't care how good Nick smelled, he was not worth dealing with Maggie.

I grabbed a towel out of my suitcase and took my turn in the shower. The bathroom was tiny but included a toilet, sink, and shower stall. I reminded myself to ask Natalie about the two buckets under the spout later and tried to scrub away the fatigue of travel.

Twenty minutes later, we were ready to go. Maggie and Luke had vacated the living room, and Natalie showed no signs of waiting for them. She'd dressed in a black

pantsuit with an emerald green blouse. It looked fantastic with her red hair, which she'd left down, but I felt decidedly frumpy in comparison.

Natalie was quiet as we left the apartment, and I found myself watching her for signs of whatever I wasn't supposed to be suspicious about. I promptly tripped on the uneven paving stones littering the yard. Natalie didn't notice. There wasn't a defined walkway like I'd thought the night before, just random squares of light-colored stone stuck in the dirt. We passed the gate and turned left. The driver was nowhere to be seen, so I assumed we were walking to the school.

The trip to the metro station was short. I noticed the ubiquitous holy cow sauntering down the road, but I was from Texas. I'd seen cows in the road before. The neighborhood was certainly nothing special. Mature trees grew in haphazard places, including in the road, but they provided welcome shade against the morning sun. There were no clouds in the sky, despite it being monsoon season. I'd expected flooding, or at least rain every day, but everything looked arid.

Dust floated up from our steps, weeds were wilting, grass was nonexistent, and wild pigs with spiky hair were sleeping on their sides in the shade. They looked like giant porcupines. Our path ended at a community gate with another guard, and I wondered what he was supposed to be protecting by sleeping in a plastic chair. Maybe he was just supposed to open the gate, not guard anything.

The road perpendicular to our gate was much busier than what I'd seen in our community. We turned left, passed a flower vendor selling lilies and marigolds next to each other, and walked four blocks to the station. The hardest part was crossing the

street. Cars didn't even try to swerve around pedestrians. They just honked and expected us to move before they got to us. I felt like I was playing a whacked out version of Frogger. Natalie moved like she owned the place and people got out of her way, so I tried to follow her lead.

I'd chosen to wear my sneakers because it wasn't like I could make the outfit any worse, so at least my feet were comfortable. It turned out to be a good decision because there was a thin layer of trash, dirt, and feces covering the road that I didn't want touching my bare feet. If I'd worn sandals like all the other women around us, I would have needed to hose down when I got to the school.

The inside of the metro station was clean and modern-looking. Chrome and glass and no dirt. Probably because it was three flights of stairs up from the road. By the time we got to the top, my bangs were slicked to my forehead with sweat. In an unexpected fit of forethought, Natalie had gotten me a metro pass card, so we could avoid the line at the ticket counter and go straight to the train platform.

"You're lucky we start at eight. Nick starts at nine-thirty, so he has to either show up early or battle the commuter crush at rush hour." Natalie didn't stop until she was at the far end of the platform.

I followed at a slower pace. "What's so bad about commuting at rush hour?"

"Well the slowness is a pain, but that's not the real problem. Indian people have no concept of personal space. If there's room around you, they see that as a chance to shove more people onto the train. Nick says he feels like a piece of cattle when he times it wrong."

I imagined Nick standing with a bunch of cows on the train as a group of nicely dressed women gathered next to us. The women were divided about half and half in their clothing styles. Half Western, half Indian. None of them were wearing jeans. All the women, Natalie included, looked professional and confident. I tugged on my t-shirt and wondered if I would be as confident if I were dressed for business. I'd never had a job that required business attire, though I had a few nice pairs of slacks and a blazer in my closet. My parents paid for school and my apartment so I wouldn't have to work and be distracted from my studies.

Natalie bumped me with her shoulder. "Why do you suddenly look depressed?"

"It's nothing." I didn't expect Natalie to let it go at that, but she surprised me.

My fingers itched to sketch the groups of women around us. The ones in dark business suits looked very Western, but then there was a hint of henna on one woman's hands and dark red powder or something in the part of another woman's hair. Before I could do more than reach into my messenger bag, the train pulled up. Natalie hustled me inside and claimed two seats next to the door.

The group of people around us had tripled while we waited, so the car was almost full. The interior was all white and shining silver. It looked like every subway train I'd ever see on TV, but much cleaner. The seats were metal and comfortable enough.

I looked around and noticed that every person on our train was a woman. One was a little girl, maybe three years old, with dark eyeliner around her eyes. She had better makeup than I did. I snuck my phone out of my purse and took a few surreptitious photos. No one appeared to notice the shutter sound this time.

With my mission complete, I nudged Natalie with my elbow. "Why are there no guys on this train?"

"Because the first car is a women-only car. It makes it easier and safer for women to commute to work."

I could see the next car through a little window on the door. Men were packed like sardines, and all of them were staring through the window at us. I glanced at Natalie, but she was messing with her phone.

"Is it really that dangerous for women to ride in a train with men here?"

"At night, yes. During the day," she shrugged, "not so much. But remember what I said about personal space? It's pretty common for a guy to rub against you *accidentally*."

"Doesn't it bother you that they're watching us through the window?" I wanted to look back at the men, but I had goose bumps on my arms. I was creeped out enough not looking.

"Nope. I just ignore the window. It's no different from being on a train in the States except they don't try to hide their staring. Guys stare everywhere."

I looked at my hands and couldn't think of anything else to say. My shoulders were tight the entire ride, and I wasn't sure I could ever simply ignore the men on the other side of the window.

Our stop was only three stations up, so luckily the ride was short. I relaxed as we climbed off the train. The Saket station looked just like the Friends Colony East station. Natalie dashed off toward the street exit, and I struggled to keep up in the growing crowd.

Nick's cattle analogy felt more apt. I managed to catch up and grab the back of Natalie's shirt as we left the station. There was a walkway over the road this time, so we joined the throng of students heading to school.

I'd expected uniforms, and this time I wasn't disappointed. Girls from kindergarten all the way up streamed by wearing light blue button down blouses with knee-length, pleated, navy blue skirts and ties. The boys wore navy slacks instead of skirts, but were otherwise the same. It reminded me of the year Mother had sent me to a Catholic private school. There'd been some disagreement about the curriculum, and Dad had insisted on public school from then on. It was one of the few times I'd seen him stand up to her.

One of the kids yelled Natalie's name, and she waved to a group in front of us. I couldn't tell who'd spoken because the closer we got to the tall iron gates across from the metro station, the less space I had to move in. Everyone had backpacks, even the adults, but a lot of people had bits of ribbon or garland in varying colors fluttering off the straps as they walked. I shifted my messenger bag to my other shoulder and wished I'd left my phone out so I could get pictures of the variety of colors among all the sameness.

Natalie swept through the crowd like royalty, and I followed in her wake watching the other adults work their way around the kids. We entered the school gate, and slowed down considerably as we were ushered through a security checkpoint. I struggled to keep my face politely blank as one person after another bumped into me.

The crush of people dispersed quickly once we were inside the school proper. Unlike outside, the grounds were clean and spacious. The landscaping was mostly open

grass with sparse trees along the edges of the gate and the buildings. I didn't see one wild animal. It was pleasant enough, but not impressive in any way.

Natalie seemed distracted as she led me across the grass. She'd been uncharacteristically silent since checking her phone on the train, and I missed her chatter. In the far right corner of the compound, the language lab lurked under drooping plumeria trees. They were heavy with blooms, and I could smell their sweet scent all along the path. The heat was just starting to get to me, so I was glad to feel cool air rush out as we opened the glass doors. I took a deep breath, smoothed the lines of my t-shirt, and stepped into the building.

We'd walked into a large hallway lit with buzzing florescent lights. Closed glass doors reflected colorful posters tacked onto the walls on our left and right. A dark stairway sat at the end of the hall. Everything seemed subdued as a trickle of students moved past us. A girl came down the stairway and waved at us.

Natalie waved back and stopped about halfway down the hallway. "She's one of my students from last year. I've been waiting for her to find time to come see me. I'll just be a minute, okay? You can go on in. Abishek is waiting for you." She pointed toward the door next to us marked Office and moved out of the flow of traffic to talk to the girl who'd hailed her.

For some reason, perhaps my inability to accurately predict the future, I was surprised by the volume of the chatter in the room. It wasn't a single office. Four rows of cubicles sat in the middle of the room with actual glass-walled offices in the four corners. Groups of students were gathered around the computers in the cubicles, some in rolling

black desk chairs, some sitting or leaning against the desks, and some standing around looking furtive. As far as I could tell, there were no other adults present.

I stayed very still just inside the door and hoped Abishek would find me before the students descended en masse. Like a predator sensing prey, one teenage head popped up from the closest group and homed in on me. She was pretty despite the ugly uniform, and I didn't entirely trust her smile.

"New teacher?"

I tried a smile of my own, but it didn't feel very solid. "Sort of. Do you know where Abishek is?"

She gave me that half-nod head-tilt and pointed at one of the cubicles on the far side of the room. Of course, he would be on the other side of the students from where I was standing.

I nodded. "Thanks." She giggled and turned back to her friends.

I felt very conspicuous in my jeans as I towered over everyone. It seemed reasonable that if I skirted the grey cubicle walls I would also avoid the students speaking a language I didn't understand. I chose the outermost path.

Two-thirds of the way through the room my luck ran out, and I ran into a student who'd suddenly rolled his chair into the aisle. My foot caught on one of the legs, and I tumbled to the carpet on my hands and knees. I heard a mumbled apology, and I had a moment to marvel at the novelty of carpet before a male voice spoke from above me.

"Are you Miss Washburne's cousin?"

I looked up, really far up, to a round face with dark eyes and a mop of curly black

hair. His hands were in his pockets, and he made no effort to help me as I climbed to my feet. “Abishek?”

“Yes, ma’am. Miss Washburne said you’ll be my new tutor.”

I wiped my clammy hands on my jeans and forced myself to smile. “Yes, that’s what she told me too. Where do you usually do this?”

He pointed to the office by the door then put his hand back in his pocket.

“Okay then. Why don’t you collect your things and meet me there?”

He gave me the head-tilt nod and moved away. I was beginning to get worried that Natalie had embellished the part about Abishek being outgoing. My fall was enough to get the students' attention even if I wasn't the shiny new white person in the room. In my peripheral vision, I could see them look at me then titter with their friends.

I hated that Abishek’s first impression involved me being sprawled on the floor. It was hard to get more undignified than that. Maybe if my clothes had somehow disappeared. I needed come up with a game plan before I Abishek made it over to the office in case he wasn’t inclined to do all the work. Teenagers could sense weakness, and I was utterly unprepared.

The student chatter behind me didn’t stop as I crossed back to the door, and I wondered what they were supposed to be doing at the computers. It seemed unlikely that the goal of the language lab was to provide a place to update Facebook and make weekend plans.

Something I’d have to ask Natalie about.

I wasn't sure what I thought would be in the office, but it held nothing except a

desk and two chairs. Not even a computer. The walls were all glass, so it didn't provide privacy either. Unless I hid under the desk.

I considered it.

I also considered calling my mother long-distance from India in what would be the middle of the night for her. Clearly, my decision-making skills were rapidly deteriorating. The chair squealed as I sat and rested my head on the desk. Why was I so anxious? I tried to step back and examine my feelings with some distance.

My pulse was pounding, and I was vaguely embarrassed by everything that had happened so far. I didn't know what I was supposed to do, and a tall Indian boy would arrive shortly expecting me to help him improve his already excellent English.

A throat cleared behind me and I sprang back from the desk. Abishek's lips twitched, but he managed not to laugh at me.

Panic took control and I started speaking without thinking. "Look, this is a terrible idea. I don't know anything about teaching, and I don't want to know. Your English sounds really good already. Do you really want to take the chance that I'll screw up a good thing?"

He came into the room and sat in the chair opposite me. "I do not need a formal tutor. I am learning conversational English and need someone to talk to me. I think you will be good at it."

I blew my bangs away from my face. "Right. Well, I guess we're talking already, so we might as well keep going. You can call me Sam, by the way."

He set his backpack on the floor next to his feet and grinned. "Okay, Sam. What

should we talk about?”

The panic fluttered again. “Why don’t you pick?”

“Do you know what happened to Shulpa?”

“No, who’s Shulpa?”

His smile faded. “Miss Washburne’s student assistant. She was helping me with conversational English, but she has not been in school. Her family says she has not been home too. It is not like her to...” He shook his head. “Evaporate? I do not think that is the right word.”

“Disappear?”

“*Thik hai*. Disappear. She is very serious student. Good daughter.”

I frowned. “When was the last time you saw her?”

He blushed. “After classes on Monday. She had to leave to meet a person at another office.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant, but Abishek looked almost guilty. I wondered if they were hooking up. Was it rude to ask? Maybe I could be subtle. “Did you meet often after classes?”

His blush deepened and he looked away. So much for subtle.

“Did you tell Natalie? I mean Miss Washburne?”

He tilted his head. “Yes. Yesterday Miss Washburne says she is not coming back and you will take her place.”

The outer door opened, and Natalie smiled at me through the glass behind Abishek as she came into the room. She didn’t stop to chat, just waved and moved on to

the students at the cubicles. Abishek had moved on to talking about a cricket match he'd watched the night before, but I was stuck on Shulpa. Maybe it was normal for Indian girls to just up and leave, but Abishek's reaction made that seem less likely. She'd disappeared just before Natalie had called to tell me not to come, ostensibly because I might be suspicious of something. How would Natalie have known she wasn't coming back when her family didn't even know? I glanced through the glass, curious if this smiling Natalie was the real one.

“Sam? Something is wrong?”

I focused back on Abishek. “I don't know.”

{ *the art of competitive shopping* }

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4

Abishek didn't talk about cricket long, thank God, and once he relaxed, he had a sly sense of humor. Natalie had told the truth about him being outgoing after all. It didn't take much for him to get me to open up about my art. I told him what my professors had said and how I'd felt that India might provide some of what was missing. He told me about his extended family who all lived together in a big house, adding on to it every time one of the men got married and brought home a bride. His parents were putting a lot of pressure on him to take his college entrance exams, but he said he wasn't ready yet.

He reminded me somewhat of Josh.

We were laughing and exchanging our favorite lines from *The Princess Bride* when Natalie knocked. I'd forgotten my concerns for a while, and though they didn't come rushing back, I felt my happy glow fade a bit. She didn't come in, just pointed to her watch and held up five fingers at Abishek.

He checked his own watch and sighed. “I must leave in a few minutes for my next class. I would like very much to see your art.”

“Well I would like very much to get some new clothes.”

He perked up as he slid his backpack on. “We will go to Sarojini Nagar Market. Maybe you choose a *sari* or *salwar* and try something new. Bright colors only, nothing boring.”

I laughed again. “We’ll see. I thought you weren’t allowed to spend time alone with women?”

He did a head jiggle back and forth. “Is it? Bring Miss Washburne. I will be tour guide and we will not have to be married.”

I shook my head and waved at him as he left the language lab. It amazed me that not only had he seen *The Princess Bride* but it was one of his favorite movies. Actually, he knew a lot about American culture. I had the feeling he was dragging his feet about his college entrance exams because he was hoping to get into a school in America.

A few other students left, and I swiveled to watch Natalie bustle from person to person. Most of the cubicles were occupied. She looked happy and so did the kids that she was helping. The only exception seemed to be the two boys huddled in the back corner. They were too far away for me to see much about them other than that they were scowling and they were watching Natalie instead of the computer. It gave me chills, so I watched them until one said something to the other and both looked right at me.

I wasn’t prepared to suddenly be in the crosshairs, so almost fell out of my chair in my attempt to appear like I hadn’t been watching them. My head jerked to the side to

focus on Natalie again. She was smiling and leaning over to help a girl with the keyboard. In the face of those boys, it seemed really stupid to think that Natalie would be involved in anything nefarious. Opinionated, bossy, and absent-minded, yes, but she always had good intentions.

I stretched, told myself to ignore the creepy boys in the corner, and pulled my sketch pad out of my bag. I wanted to try to capture the good intentions I could see in Natalie at that moment for the next time my imagination got uppity.

Either the sketches helped or Natalie had stopped doing whatever was making her nervous because the rest of the week passed without incident. I'd spend the mornings with Abishek, have lunch at the student cafeteria, and then work on some sketches until Natalie was ready to go home. No one commented on my clothes, but I was still uncomfortable in the jeans. I got strange looks from other adults at the school, but that wasn't the worst of it. The weather was too hot for the thick material on the walks home, so I ended up drenched by the time we reached the apartment.

Natalie showed me how to work the little washing machine out in the back of the apartment, but there was no dryer and it took almost a full day for my jeans to dry. I was quickly running out of options, and I wanted to try some of the cooler cotton outfits that I saw on the Indian women. We didn't make it out to a store that first week. Natalie needed me to make notes about Abishek's conversational skills, and after she helped me with the first day, it was fairly easy. By the time I was done each afternoon though, I only had enough energy left for dinner and passing out. Despite my constant weariness, I had trouble sleeping at night. I kept waking up every couple of hours, which left me less

than rested. The jet lag eased up as we got closer to the weekend though.

Abishek was serious about going to the Sarojini Nagar Market, so Natalie and I agreed to meet him there on Sunday. The market was on other side of Delhi, closer to the airport, so we took the metro most of the way. I was surprised by the change in attire of the women on our car. Usually we ride with commuters going to work in business suits, but on a Sunday morning most of them wore the pajama suits that Natalie called salwar kameez. They were essentially loose cotton pants cuffed at the ankles paired with short sleeved tunic tops. Most of the women also had gauzy scarves wrapped around their necks and shoulders. I had to admit they looked comfortable, especially compared to the restrictiveness and warmth of my jeans. I'd given in and worn a tank top for the shopping trip, and most of the women were openly staring at my bared shoulders.

By that point, I knew better than to look at the window to the next car, but goosebumps spread across my arms as I remembered the way the men stared. I made a note to buy a gauzy scarf as soon as we got to the market.

Natalie spent the ride texting someone on her phone. I'd learned that when she was texting, she was blind to the world around her until she was done and not a minute sooner. The announcer called our station and I nudged her for confirmation. She looked up at the digital readout and went back to her texting. The train stopped right as Natalie put her phone away.

She smiled at me and stood. "You ready for this?"

I shrugged. "I guess. Where is Abishek meeting us again?"

"In front of the McDonald's in the southeast corner."

I nodded and followed Natalie out into the sunlight. The market was clearly visible from the raised metro platform. It was laid out in a sideways H shape with a taller building in the bottom right corner. The roofs changed from tarps to tin to brick and back, as if a toddler had thrown the booths together randomly. Trees grew all over, but that didn't stop enterprising vendors from building their stalls around them.

The view disappeared as we moved down to street level, but Natalie seemed to know where she was going. I followed her around the corner from the station and down a quieter, shaded street. A large complex of buildings surrounded by an iron fence opened up on the side opposite the market.

Natalie followed my gaze. "That's a public girl's school. I came here once on a weekday afternoon and there were kids all along here begging for money and trying to sell metal trinkets."

"Kids from the school? Were they in uniform?"

She laughed. "It's not like the school I work at. Delhi Public School is actually a posh private school for the *Brahmin*." She must have seen the confusion on my face. "The upper class. The ones with money to spend on teaching their sons how to get into a good Western college and their daughters how to speak English to the servants."

From my conversations with Abishek, I knew she wasn't being cynical. His main goal in life was to go to the States and come back with an engineering degree. His family had enough money that he didn't have to work, but it was expected that he'd improve their social standing by getting a job with a well-known company.

My mother would have fit in just fine with the Indian caste culture.

The dirt path next to the scrubby tree line ended, and I stepped out into the road. A loud honk sounded behind me as a speeding vehicle with familiar green and yellow markings barely missed sideswiping me. I yelped and jumped back, too late for it to have done any good, but it was hard to control an action that had its root in the fight or flight part of my brain.

"What are those things anyway?"

"They're *tuk tuks*. I think the technical term is auto rickshaw, but I prefer *tuk tuk* because it makes them sound like large passenger animals."

"Uh huh."

She pulled me around a copse of trees, and a small shopping center opened up ahead of us. It was less than three blocks from the metro, but it seemed like we'd been walking for a while. The place looked run-down. Dirty windows were obscured with posters for products and sales. Black streaks ran down the sides of the grey building, and I was sure I didn't want to know what they were from. People were bustling about, but everyone seemed to be ignoring everyone else. The familiar golden arches drew my attention in the far corner, though the only door seemed to be for the shop next to it.

Two sets of steps led up to the front of the shop. There wasn't a name for the store I could see, but it had stacks of fruit outside. Flies were buzzing around the fruit, and I could smell something rotting under the scent of ripe pineapple. A twinge in my stomach made me aware that I'd eaten breakfast this morning from a street vendor without questioning the sanitary conditions of the food.

A tug on my hand stopped me from going any further as Natalie walked right

through the doors. Standing next to me was a little boy, maybe seven years old, wearing dirty, ripped clothes and a fez. He had a curly mustache painted on his upper lip in what looked like eyeliner, and he was holding a small metal bucket up to me.

He said something in Hindi and shook his bucket. It was just this kind of experience I'd come to India for. I pulled my pad and a pencil out of my bag and sketched as fast as I could. He shook his bucket again after a few seconds and repeated his entreaty. I'd planned to give him whatever rupee coins I had in my pocket as soon as I was done, but Abishek and Natalie beat me to it.

"*Jao, jao.*" Abishek shoed the boy away before I could give him anything. "Do not give money to beggars. They only want more."

Natalie nodded emphatically. "Yeah. If you'd given him something, he might have followed you home, and we're not allowed to have pets."

Abishek laughed at her joke, but I didn't think it was very funny. He'd been the most charming beggar I'd ever seen, like a tiny Aladdin. It bothered me that Natalie and Abishek both thought of him as a pesky animal. I trailed behind and dug some change out of my pocket. I still felt like I should give the boy a few coins, after all, I'd gotten something out of the encounter, but he'd already moved on to another person lingering outside the market.

I caught up to them at the crumbling arch that signified the entrance to the market proper. "What's the deal with the evil-doer mustache and the bucket?"

Natalie stopped and looked back at the kid before answering me. "There's supposedly a god in the bucket. If you make offerings to the god by putting money in

there then he'll give you a blessing. I'm not sure about the mustache. Abishek?"

He shrugged. "It is to get attention. What is evil-doer?"

Natalie did a quick evil laugh. "You know, bad guys."

I chimed in. "Like Prince Humperdink."

"*Thik hai.*" He did the head-tilt that I'd learned meant yes, but I wasn't sure he actually understood. "Come. I know good place for *saris.*"

Abishek turned sideways so Natalie and I could precede him into the crowded alley. I was immediately assaulted with smells of fried samosas and musty clothes. The alley opened up to a modern-day bazaar. Each stall had Western-style clothes hanging from vertical racks two floors high. The hawkers carried long metal poles with hooks at the end to retrieve the items shoppers pointed to. Natalie wove her way through the crowd, and I had trouble following her while I gawked at the abundance of colors around us.

There weren't any jeans or shorts for sale, but anything else I thought I'd need was on display. I tugged on Natalie's ponytail and stopped to get a closer look at a rack of flowy tank tops. The tags said Calvin Klein, but the clothes themselves seemed a little shoddy up close. The seams were uneven and they were covered with a layer of dust. Some even had mysterious brown and green stains on them. My awe quickly transformed into disappointment.

Natalie shook her head and gestured for me to follow her again. It didn't take long for me to get sticky with sweat. The trees provided nice shade, but there wasn't a breeze to move the hot air. We had to walk single-file to get through the crowd, so we

stayed silent. Every few seconds, random men would approach me and tell me to buy handkerchiefs or sunglasses. Abishek shooed them away, but a new one always came right back.

As we approached another wall of booths, Abishek moved past me to speak to Natalie. He pointed to a shadowy entrance between the hanging clothes and ventured inside. Natalie smiled at me then followed.

The tunnel led to yet another set of stores set up between the stalls in enclosed wooden alcoves. These all sold traditional Indian clothing in bright colors. It was considerably quieter out of the rush, but even Abishek started to sweat in the stifling heat. He stopped outside an alcove and said something in Hindi. An excited response came from inside and a round man poked his head around the framework.

“Welcome, welcome. You like *sari*, yes?”

I nodded and he waved me forward. Material was draped across the entrance, and as I got past Abishek, I noticed that the entire interior of the store was a raised mattress. The walls were completely covered with shelves of folded material wrapped in cellophane. Two women in jewel tones stood on the mattress and a third woman threw more cellophane wrapped packages down from a hole in the ceiling where I could see another room packed with material.

Natalie crossed her arms and leaned against the wood frame as I climbed onto the mattress. “I think a nice red for the lady.”

A sharp, acrid scent rose from the pad as I sat down, and the man who’d spoken before started bowing repeatedly at Natalie. “Yes, madam. Of course. Red is very good

choice. My store sell only finest *saris*. You like Kashmiri silk? Handmade.” He started tossing packages at me in various shades of red and pink.

I held up my hands. “Wait. I’d like green or blue. No pink.” The man started bowing again and a new selection of *saris* soon started raining down on me. I looked to Abishek for help. “How am I supposed to know what they look like?”

The man stopped in mid-toss and sank down next to me. Before Abishek could speak, he ripped open a couple of the packages and pulled out the material to show me the designs. “Very nice Kashmiri silk. Hand stitching.”

He thrust the material at me, so I took it from him and felt the stitching as Natalie and Abishek looked on. The *sari* I was holding was a shade of blue bordering on purple and had red vines along the length of it. It wasn’t my style, but I didn’t want to insult the man sitting between me and the entrance to his shop. “It’s very nice, but do you have any green ones?”

He handed me a lighter shade of blue with the same red vines and put the blue-purple package into a bag. I shook my head and handed the lighter blue back to him. He grabbed a red one to fill my empty hands. The process continued for a while with me trying to politely decline and him putting every *sari* I complimented into a shopping bag.

When the guy handed me yet another bright purple *sari*, I set it on the bed myself and climbed to my feet. “Thank you for all your help, but I need to get some air.”

He did the head-tilt, pulled out an order pad, and started adding up numbers. Natalie shook herself out of her stupor as I managed to crawl down off the bed without falling. “Whoa, what’re you doing there?”

The guy answered her in Hindi so Abishek translated. “He is adding up cost for *saris*. Sam choose six *saris*, but he say he will give one for free.”

I’d had about enough of people not listening to me at that point. I snatched the pad out of his hand and threw it behind him on the bed. “I don’t want any *saris*. Thank you very much, but we’re leaving now.” I turned on my heel and marched out of the hidden clothes shop section.

Natalie followed right behind me, but Abishek lingered at the stall. I emerged into the main thoroughfare and took a deep breath of fresh air. I would have sold my first-born child for a bottle of ice water. After a moment of watching me fan myself, Natalie took pity on me and pulled a lukewarm bottle of water out of her bag.

“And I’ll bet you just learned to start carrying water with you everywhere.”

I nodded as I gulped, then sighed in relief.

“Don’t worry. Most people don’t buy *saris* in places like that. Everyone I know just hires a tailor to come to their house. It’s probably cheaper anyway. Those guys take advantage of tourists wandering the market to jack up their prices.”

I capped the water and stuck it in my own bag. “If you knew that, why did you let me go in there?”

“For the experience. You said you wanted to try something different. I’ll bet you’ve never gone through anything like that before.”

“You’d be right.” I wasn’t sure if I should be angry or not.

“Besides, it was Abishek’s idea. He probably would have gotten a kickback if you’d bought anything, not that he needs the money.” She stared at the entrance

speculatively. “Come to think of it, I’m not sure what he got out of taking us in there.”

The clothes next to the opening twitched and Abishek emerged with a big smile on his face. He didn’t seem too upset about losing out on some extra money, so I resolved not to be too upset at almost being bullied into buying overpriced, ugly clothes.

I smiled back as he approached us. “Ready to move on?”

“Yes. My uncle says to come back any time.”

Natalie moved out of the way as a man with a cart tried to get past us. “So what do you want to do now? More *sari* shopping?”

“No. I think I’d rather just call a tailor when we get home.” I looked down the aisle and saw a display of throw pillows piled on the ground. “I do need sheets and a pillow though. I appreciate you letting me use one of yours, Natalie, but my I’d prefer my own stuff.”

“No problem. I know just the place.” She grabbed my wrist and set off again, winding her way through the crowd.

Natalie stopped tugging as we turned at the end of the aisle and dropped my hand with a flourish. “Ta da!”

We’d stopped outside another squat building, but this one was in better repair than the others. The windows were relatively clean, and the shelves were neat and orderly. I braved the store alone, and this time no one tried to tell me what to buy. They seemed to only sell bedding, but that was okay because all I wanted was bedding.

The sheets were all ugly flower prints. They were super cheap, but none of them struck me as particularly restful. I pulled out a package with big yellow lilies on a blue

and white background and gave up. As I was walking past the rest of the sheets, a lone white spot amid all the bright colors caught my eye. I stopped and pulled it out to see if it was a trick. No trick. It was white with little blue flowers on it, really similar to the sheet that was currently occupying my bed. Guess I was replacing that sheet after all.

I grabbed a pillow from a bin in the back and took my selections to the counter by the door. The cashier asked something in Hindi, and I shook my head.

"English, please?"

He nodded. "Home delivery?"

"Um, no? Do you take credit cards?"

He pointed to a sign that said "cash only" in big letters. I waved at Natalie through the window until she came inside. She must have read my panic because she nudged me away from the counter and pulled out her wallet. I had a maybe five dollars worth of rupees on me, and it wasn't nearly enough. There must be an ATM nearby where I could get some more cash.

The cashier seemed to be arguing with Natalie in some kind of pidgin language. I caught a couple of words in English, but it was hard to understand. I hadn't thought Natalie spoke Hindi, but she was holding her own in the conversation. I moved a little further away and noticed a small display of plants behind the counter. Most of them were lush and green, but there was one on a shelf by itself that looked like it'd had a stroke.

Even I could recognize bamboo, but half of the leaves on the top were brown and crispy. A red "clearance" sticker was attached to its clear glass bowl. There was no soil, just a bit of water covering the bottom tips of the sprouty roots. I touched one of the

healthy leaves and wondered why no one was taking care of it. Before I could argue myself out of it, I grabbed the plant and got in line behind Natalie.

They must have worked out whatever squabble they'd had because my stuff was shoved into a couple of sacks and Natalie reached for them. The cashier didn't look up as he rang up the plant. I handed over some of my rupees and joined Abishek waiting for me outside. He eyed the bamboo in my hand, but didn't say anything.

"I just felt sorry for it. Someone should care."

"Do not worry. Bamboo is strong and very hard to kill."

I smiled at him. "Thanks. Where's Natalie?"

He shrugged and plucked a dead leaf from my plant. "She says she would be right back."

I searched the crowd and finally spotted her under another stone archway. She was talking to two men in fancy black suits. They were facing away from me, but from Natalie's body language, it didn't look like a nice conversation. Both men carried briefcases and one turned just enough that I could see the glint of gold on his hand.

As I watched, Natalie spread her arms wide and shook her head, then pushed past them to stomp back to us. I averted my eyes until she got closer, and when I looked back, the guys were gone. Natalie was smiling by the time she reached us, and she hooked her arm through mine like nothing had happened.

"You ready to head home, yet? Because I could probably find some more pushy sellers for you to fight off."

"No thanks, I think I'm ready to go if it's all the same to you."

Abishek laughed, and Natalie towed me back to the entrance.

We parted ways with Abishek, and climbed aboard the metro in silence. Natalie still had my bags from the shop. I wasn't sure how to broach the subject of the two men she'd been talking to, so I started with something easy.

"Thanks for lending me that money. I'll repay you as soon as I can get to an ATM."

She waved it away. "No hurry. I know where you live."

Several stops went by before I tried again. "I saw you talking to some men in suits at the market. Is everything okay?"

She smiled, but her face looked strained. "Everything's fine. I just ran into some old friends."

"Do they always dress up to go to the market?" My joke fell flat, and she wouldn't meet my eyes. The announcer called our station as she hesitated.

"Natalie? Are you sure you're okay?"

She didn't answer me until we'd reached our screen door. "Look, it's important that you don't tell anyone you saw me talking to those guys. I could get in a lot of trouble."

I was afraid she might be in trouble, but she clearly wasn't going to tell me any more. There were a lot of other things I could be worrying about, just like she'd said on that phone call my first night. I nodded and went into our apartment with her following on my heels. I'd give her a little space, and then ask again.

Nick came into the room from the opposite direction carrying two big bowls and

three smaller bowls. "Just in time to eat."

Natalie dropped the bags in our room, and I helped him distribute the goods on the coffee table. "How did you know we'd be back at the right time?"

"Telepathy." He set a fistful of spoons next to the bowls and sat down.

Natalie joined us and grabbed a bowl. "What are we eating?"

"Dal and rice."

"I should have known. It's the only thing you know how to make."

Nick put his hand over his heart. "Hey. That hurts. I can make toast too. But I didn't make this. One of my students' moms thought I was too skinny so she had him bring this to school today. I figured I'd share it in case of poison or bad cooking."

I peered into the bowls and saw a yellow porridge-like substance with tiny round chunks in it. Not being a fan of porridge, I was not impressed. The smells coming off the table were amazing though, like the bean soup Dad used to make before Mother insisted it was too low-class. My stomach rumbled, and I grabbed a bowl.

I spooned dal over my rice, and I was happy to discover that dal was delicious. It was creamy and beany and had just a hint of kick. Josh would have loved this stuff. Tears pricked my eyes and I blinked them back. Stupid jetlagged hormones.

Nick was watching me. I swallowed my first mouthful and decided on confrontation instead of avoidance for once.

"Yes, Nick?"

He grinned. "Just waiting to see how you react. Maggie spit hers out the first time she tried it."

Natalie snorted. "Said there was a bug in it. She just wanted to give you a chance to save her from the evil Indian food."

"The bug was never disproved."

"You gave her your bowl."

"It wasn't a big deal. She was hungry. I just got another bowl."

"See, this is why she's obsessed with you. Your white knight syndrome. You just have to help, and she wants someone to take care of her every whim." She looked at Nick speculatively, and he shoved a big spoonful of dal in his mouth. "You know, Maggie has a tailor who does house calls. She'd never share him with me, but if Nick asked nicely, she might cough up the number."

He swallowed. "No. No, Natalie. You know what will happen if I ask her for a favor. She'll start harassing me at all hours of the night again."

"Suck it up. Sam deserves some good clothes while she's here. Get your white knight in gear."

Nick looked at me for a long moment. "This is going to come due, and you are going to owe me."

His tone made me aware that he wasn't going to be asking me to replace a light bulb or fetch him a drink. I felt a warm flush building from my chest and ducked my head. I wasn't sure how to respond to blatant flirting, so I just focused on eating. He sighed and pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. A few minutes of sweet-talking later, and we had her tailor's phone number.

Nick did the honors of calling the tailor since he knew the most words in Hindi.

He wasn't fluent by any means, but he could say "come here now," which was really all we needed.

"He'll be here in about an hour with some samples. You pick which one you like, and he'll tailor it tonight then have it brought here early tomorrow morning." Nick put his phone on the coffee table and went back to his dinner.

It seemed too easy, and frankly kind of cool, that some guy with trade skills was going to come to my apartment and make me clothes. I felt like royalty. I imagined a skinny man with a svelte suit and a tape measure around his neck, maybe long hair pulled back into a ponytail. For some reason, my imaginary tailor had a British accent and was condescending of my volleyball t-shirt.

I sat on the couch and struggled with the urge to go change. I was done changing for people who might judge me. Nick and Natalie spent the rest of the hour bickering like an old married couple and horror stories about student teaching. I relaxed into the couch and played the part of attentive audience. My mind kept returning to the half-finished sketches of the little boy with the bucket.

The doorbell rang, and I could see the shape of a man through the screen. He couldn't have been further from my imaginary tailor friend. The door squeaked as Natalie let him in, and he stopped just inside. He was fat and hunched over with a sweat-stained shirt half tucked into khaki pants. This man did not look like a tailor. On the plus side, he smelled like dryer sheets.

"Are you sure about this?" I whispered the comment, though he probably heard me anyway.

"Maggie says this is her guy, and I've never seen her look anything but annoyingly perfect." Natalie slapped him on the back as she walked past him back to the couch, and he almost toppled over.

He had a large messenger bag over his shoulder and a tackle box in his hands. He didn't look up as I walked closer.

"Do you need somewhere to set up?"

He must have understood English because he shook his head no and dropped his stuff on the floor right there.

I waited.

A few seconds passed in awkward silence as no one moved. The TV turned on, and I jumped. Nick had the remote in his hand, so I glared at him. When I turned back, the tailor was digging around inside his tackle box. He pulled out a pencil nub, a square of paper, and a yellow tape measure. I was glad I hadn't changed my clothes.

He made an upward motion with his hands that I assumed meant he wanted me to lift my arms. Without touching me, he measured my chest, waist, hips, and inseam. I was reluctantly impressed that he got my measurements without making the whole situation more awkward with an accidental boob grab.

I glanced over my shoulder, but my roommates were ignoring me in favor of a poorly dubbed game show.

It wasn't long before the tailor was putting away his stuff and pulling out fabric samples from the messenger bag. Each swatch looked like a quilting quarter, about eighteen inches square. My sister would have been in heaven if she could have had a guy

home deliver quilting quarters. Why was I thinking about her so much?

I flipped through the choices he'd laid out on the floor. Most were bright with what I would consider clashing colors from the same spoke of the color wheel. I rubbed my head. Parts of Madeline, like knowing about the color wheel, were unfortunately stuck in my mind forever, probably from those unending afternoons when I had to "help" her scrapbook.

It was clear my sister had infected me with her evil.

One of the samples was a pretty moss green with gold swirls. That one would do for the salwar. I chose a royal blue with a small white paisley design for the *sari*. I pulled my selections out, and the tailor nodded.

He started packing up the samples, and I assumed we were done. It was quick and painless, even if he was the silent type. Nick glanced up at the sound of the zipper on the messenger bag and said something in Hindi.

The tailor muttered, "Six am," then hustled back out the door. I never saw his eyes.

We didn't stay up much later. I managed to work a shower in before bed while Natalie helped Nick clean up. My thoughts kept circling around from Natalie's assistant to the phone call to the suited guys to Natalie's behavior tonight. She was acting completely normal only a few hours after telling me she would get into trouble if I didn't keep my mouth shut. Maybe I could help if she was in trouble. I tried to think of some way to get her to confide in me, but my tired brain remained stubbornly blank.

She was already in bed with the lights out when I came out of the bathroom. A

cowardly part of me was relieved, and I decided that I wouldn't just accept the situation. I'd ask her again on the metro. I'd keep asking until she gave me a real answer. The boy with the bucket drifted into my mind again. All in all, I'd mostly had fun at the market, and I'd definitely had fun at dinner. Even with the potential trouble, I'd had a good day, which should have prepared me for the day that followed it.

*{ if the sari fits }*

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5

I smelled sunshine. My brain wasn't awake, so I rolled toward the smell. It was a good smell, and I wanted more of it. My brain woke up abruptly when I hit the floor after rolling out of bed. I was wrapped in my sheet like a burrito, and there were feet next to my face.

"Are you awake now?" Nick whispered.

Natalie was snoring softly beyond him somewhere. It was still dark in the room, so I sat up and glared at the place I assumed his face was.

"What do you want? This had better not be some deviant sexual fetish or I will take your ass down."

"What?" I heard clothes rustling then I was hit in the face with what felt like a sweatshirt. "Put this on."

"No. It's like eighty-five degrees in here, and I'm not sweating for your amusement."

I swear I could feel his eyes rolling. I had that effect on people when they rudely woke me up. "Fine. Do what you want. But your clothes are here and you need to sign for them. The delivery guy might be a little uncomfortable seeing that you're not wearing a bra."

The door closed behind Nick quietly, and I huffed out a breath. How did he know I wasn't wearing a bra? It was the sweatshirt that smelled like sunshine. I held it to my face and inhaled like my yoga teacher taught me. Then I put it on. Natalie rolled over and muttered something about pudding when I opened the door. I wasn't sure if she was awake or not, so I hurried into the living room.

A waif-like teenage boy was standing by the door. Why didn't anyone take more than four steps into our apartment? He was skinnier than anyone I'd ever seen. I wanted to give him a sandwich, and possibly a Thanksgiving turkey, and then I wanted to go back to bed.

Nick was leaning against the back of the couch with his arms crossed over his bare chest. A pair of loose sweat pants sagged around his hips. I was suddenly much warmer in the sweatshirt. He met my gaze and tilted his head toward the starving kid in the doorway.

The boy held out a brown paper-wrapped package, so I took it.

"Rupees 850." His voice was deeper than I expected.

I froze and Nick sighed. He pulled a wad of cash out of the pocket of his sweats and counted out five bills. I needed to get to an ATM. It wasn't polite to have your roommates pay for everything. I was pretty sure that was on my mother's list of etiquette

rules.

The boy pocketed the cash, had me sign a ledger, then left. The whole experience took maybe five minutes, but it was surreal in that I wasn't sure I was awake yet. I was still staring at the door, holding the package, when Nick poked me in the side.

"Let's see how they look."

I shook my head. "Huh? What time is it, anyway?"

"A little after six. Stop stalling."

"I'm not stalling. I'm still asleep. And do you always carry cash in your sleep pants?"

He grinned. "Who said these were my sleep pants?"

I rubbed the bridge of my nose with my free hand. "Right. I suppose it would be responsible to try them on and make sure they fit."

The brown paper gave way easily as I tore into it. Soft, royal blue cotton spilled out into my hands. It smelled April fresh, just like the tailor the night before. I pulled out a long swath of rectangular fabric followed by a plain white skirt and a tiny white top. Surely there had to be more to the top than that. I held it up against me and discovered that it would only just cover my breasts though the sleeves came halfway down to my elbows.

I looked up and met Nick's gaze. "I think he brought me the wrong size."

"No, that long piece wraps around and covers most of your bare skin."

"Most?"

He shrugged. "Depends on how you fold it."

“It’s folded? I thought it was just wrapped and tucked in.” There was a lot of material draped over the couch. “I don’t know how to fold it.”

He pushed away from the couch and handed me the skirt. “I’ll help you. Go put those two pieces on. You can use my room. Unless you want to wake Nat up and get her involved.”

I remembered the men from yesterday and the reprieve of the last night. “No. We should probably let her sleep.”

“Okay. Just you and me.” He smiled and crossed his arms again. I was sure there was a trap in there somewhere, but without some caffeine I was unlikely to spot it.

“I’ll be right out.”

He nodded, and I could feel his eyes on me until the door closed between us.

Most of my experience in what a guy’s room looked like was through Josh. The occasional boyfriend was always chosen by my parents first, and those relationships had never gone far enough to merit me seeing their bedrooms. If I was completely honest, Nick was the first guy I’d been willing to let talk me into his room.

Nick’s room surprised me. His bathroom light was on, so I could see well enough, and unlike my brother’s pigsty, Nick kept his space neat. The big stupid bed that Natalie had mentioned was taking up most of the space. It was made of a dark heavy wood with a canopy of white gauzy curtains. I sat down on it and allowed myself a moment of envy. He had a real mattress. A real pillowtop mattress. It practically guaranteed a decent night’s sleep. I considered locking his door and taking the day off to enjoy Nick’s amazing bed, but I didn’t think he’d appreciate having to go to work in

nothing but sweats.

I snickered. His students might appreciate it, but I didn't want him to get fired.

The bed smelled just like the sweatshirt, and I wondered what he used to achieve that particular yummy scent. He only had two other pieces of furniture in the room, a tall dresser and a nightstand made of the same dark wood. There was something carved into the drawer faces of the dresser, but I couldn't make it out without moving closer. He had a picture, a wallet, and some coins on the nightstand. I leaned over to see the picture better and saw him standing with three women and one teenager who had to be his sisters. It was sweet that the only personal thing he had displayed was a picture of his family.

I'd only wasted a couple of minutes looking around, but I jumped when Nick tapped on the door. "You okay in there?"

"I'm fine. Almost ready."

I shucked the sweatshirt and tank top, and draped them over the end of his bed. The white material of the skirt was so thin it was transparent, so I had to leave my sleep shorts on to maintain any dignity. As Nick had so kindly pointed out, I wasn't wearing a bra, but the top was made of a thicker material, so once I had it in place, nothing inappropriate was visible.

I turned to go back into the living room, but Nick was standing in the doorway. "How long have you been there?"

"Not long enough. There's a mirror on the back of my door, so you can see how to fold the *sari* while we're doing it." He closed the door behind him, and I got a glimpse

of myself in the mirror.

Neon green frogs were visible through the skirt, and I winced. Hair sticking out at odd angles and smudged mascara completed the look. Nick nudged me to the small bit of open space between the door and the bed, then took up a position behind me.

I could feel the heat from his chest against my bare back, and my breath quickened as his arms came around me. The tanned skin of his hand looked dark against my pale stomach. For a moment, I forgot why I was standing in his bedroom. I forgot everything. It was quiet in the dark, he was warm, and I would've been happy to stand there all day.

“Watch.” His breath tickled my ear and I shivered.

His fingers brushed my abdomen as he tucked the plainer end of the fabric into the waistband of the skirt at my right hip. I stood very still and tried not to pant. He held the tucked in section with one hand and pulled the material across to my other hip with the other.

“Normally you'd pin the fold here at the beginning, but you can just hold it for now. Make sure you're watching what I do.”

I took over holding the first tuck, so he could do a complicated back and forth fold with what looked like half the material at my left hip.

“This makes the pleats, then it tucks into here and is usually pinned.” He secured the wad of material in the waistband as well. It looked lumpy and a bit lopsided, but Nick seemed pleased with it. So far, the process looked complicated and was probably more enjoyable with him folding it for me.

Nick bumped my back as he leaned forward to wrap the fabric all the way around me once at my hips then again around my waist. I felt a bit like a mummy because the tight wrapping restricted my movements, which would have been a problem if I'd ever planned to move, but at least I could let go of first tuck.

“Did you get that? The first time around is for the skirt, the second is to cover your mid-drift.” He smoothed the remaining four feet of fabric over my left shoulder. It spread out down my arm in a half-sleeve and hung down to mid-thigh in the back. “The last pin goes at the shoulder to keep it in place.”

Without the fabric to occupy his hands, he settled them on my shoulders. I could feel the roughness of his palms snagging the thin cotton. I wondered what he did to develop such calluses when he spent all day in a classroom.

My heart was pounding, and I was trying desperately to ignore the expanse of Nick's bare skin visible in the dim light. I was sure he could hear my pulse standing so close behind me, but he showed no outward signs of noticing or being affected.

It took a great deal of effort to shift my gaze from his hands to my reflection in the mirror, and I was stunned when I did. Normally, I was a slim hourglass, but in the *sari*, I had real curves. I looked lush and feminine, and the color did amazing things to my eyes. Even the smudged mascara looked exotic and mysterious.

I turned around. "Is this what it's supposed to look like?"

Nick met my eyes and I knew I'd been wrong about him being affected. He trailed his hands down my arms and crowded me against the glass. “Yes. Do you need my help taking it off?”

There was more to his tone than a simple offer of help. We stood facing each other with only our hands touching, and I knew that with one word I could test out Nick's awesome bed. As tempting as his offer was, and my body was all for it, I wasn't clear on his relationship with Maggie. I didn't relish the idea of being part of a harem.

"I think I've got it." I slid sideways out of his grasp and crossed to where I'd left my tank top on his bed. "Where did you learn to fold a *sari*?"

Nick didn't move for a moment, then he blew out a breath and pulled a towel out of the top drawer of his dresser. "The internet. Nat didn't want to learn how to do it, so she proposed that we have an epic tournament of rock, paper, scissors and the loser would have to learn how to fold a *sari*. I still say she cheated." He smiled at the memory and ran a hand through his hair. "I've got to take shower." I'm pretty sure he meant please get the hell out of my room.

I grabbed my tank top and left without looking back.

I made it three steps into the living room before Natalie's voice nearly made me jump out of my skin. "What were you doing in there? Why are you wearing a *sari*? Is this some kind of kinky sex play? Please give me details."

"Nick was teaching me to fold a *sari*. That's all."

"That doesn't look like all. You're all flushed."

"It's hot in there. Do you really think I'd come out of Nick's room wearing this if we'd been doing anything remotely sexual?"

Natalie chuckled. "You're right. I'm losing it. You wouldn't have come out until I dragged you out." She shook her head and checked her watch. "C'mon, you have just

enough time to change if we're going to stop at Cafe Coffee Day."

"Cafe Coffee Day?"

"Yeah, it's the closest thing to Starbucks you'll find here, but the drinks are decent. I normally don't splurge during the week, but this is a special occasion."

Sunlight was streaming through the window in the living room, and I became acutely aware that I needed caffeine. I'd been in Nick's room long enough for the sun to come up and for us to irrevocably alter our relationship. My hormones were finally cooling off, and in hindsight, I wondered if Nick had maneuvered me into his room with ulterior motives. There was nothing I could do about it at the moment except put on something less complicated and hope it wasn't going to be awkward later.

Natalie waited in the living room for me to throw on yet another pair of jeans and a t-shirt. There wasn't time for a normal beauty routine, so I pulled my hair back into a stubby ponytail, brushed my teeth, applied mascara, and I was done. I looped my bag over my shoulder, and followed Natalie out the door. She didn't even wait until we got the street before pouncing.

"I like the idea of you and Nick. Lord knows he's hot, and all that hotness is going to waste on Maggie."

Apparently, we were going to take care of it being awkward right away. "It wasn't like that."

Natalie raised her eyebrows. "Do tell. How was it then?"

"He was being a good friend and helping me with my new *sari*."

"Honey, I've been friends with Nick for six years, and he's never helped me with

my *sari* in his bedroom with the door closed.”

I couldn't meet her eyes. “Well maybe you're not as good of friends as we are.”

She snorted out a laugh. “Yes, that's entirely likely.”

We climbed the stairs to the platform, but instead of heading to our usual waiting spot, Natalie led me around a corner that I'd assumed led to another waiting area. A shop was shoved into the space between the wall and the maintenance stairs. A bright red sign proclaiming it Cafe Coffee Day was offset above the door. I'd forgotten we were stopping for coffee.

Natalie led the way into the tiny storefront. There was no one else in the coffee shop. I wondered if all the metro stations had coffee stands in them and why there wasn't more of a line. Natalie got us both blended iced vanilla coffees and paid for me again. I was developing the bad habit of never paying for my own stuff. Mother would definitely take advantage of that habit if I still had it when I returned home.

The clerk had our drinks up fast, so we shuffled back to our platform to sip and wait. Sweat dripped down my back, as usual, but I was getting used to it. I didn't even notice the dampness anymore. That said, the cold, creamy goodness in my cup just about made my morning. Not that it was better than having an intimate moment with a half-dressed Nick, but it was a different kind of pleasure. One with a less disastrous ending.

Belatedly, I realized I'd dropped the conversational ball with Natalie. “Sorry, thanks for the drink. And the sheets. And I need to thank Nick for paying that tailor.”

She made a loud slurping noise as she drank. “No worries. You can pay me back today. There's an ATM at the school that takes international cards. Nick can wait until

after you pay me."

"Does he sleep in sweats?"

"That's an abrupt change in topic. Why do you ask?"

I relayed Nick's little revelation from that morning, and Natalie started laughing. "Nick sleeps naked. And before you start, I only know that because Maggie snuck into his room once and he screams like a little girl when people climb into bed with him unexpectedly."

Maggie was definitely approaching stalker levels in my estimation. "Have you ever...?" I made a vague loopy motion with my hands, but she understood me.

"Nah. He may be my type, but there was never any chemistry, which is just another way that Mother Nature is messing with me. It would be like making out with your brother."

I was both relieved and uneasy with that news. There were enough issues in my life at the moment without adding in guy trouble. And he would be so much trouble. I didn't feel like I knew Nick well enough to make a judgment call on his moral compass, and his relationship with Maggie bothered me on a couple of levels. If they weren't dating, why was she always hanging all over him? If they were dating, why did he just proposition me? If they're friends with benefits, what does he want from me? Natalie would probably be able to answer all those questions.

I watched her tilt her cup to try to get the last dregs of liquid up the straw. "What kind of a guy is Nick?"

She looked up from her cup, her straw dangling from her mouth. "Do I detect a

hint of interest? It would make my matchmaking little heart go pitter patter if he found a nice girl to settle down with."

"As long as it's not Maggie?"

"Maggie is not a nice girl. Therefore, she doesn't count."

I rolled my eyes. "Fine. I'm serious though. What kind of a guy is Nick?"

She tilted her head at me. "Do you want to know because you're interested in a relationship or because you want a quick booty call while you're here?"

Other people had started to gather on the platform, so I lowered my voice. "Do I really seem like the booty call type to you?" I shifted my feet along the clean tiles. "And that's kind of what I wanted to know about him."

She shrugged. "I've never known him to need a booty call. Remember, he has four sisters and he spent years trapped in nerd-land. Those kinds of experiences make for a pretty good grasp of right and wrong. Honestly, I wish he'd move just a little further into asshole territory and tell Maggie to get lost, but he doesn't want to hurt her feelings."

"You want him to be meaner?"

"Just to Maggie. Let me give you an example. When we first got here, I had my head so far up my ass I was wearing it as a hat. I thought I knew everything about everything, and I treated the people trying to help me here like illiterate hicks."

I took a long drink of my coffee slushy and nodded, remembering the joke she'd made about the boy with the bucket. She still had a bit of that attitude.

"Nick hogtied me and gave me a come to Jesus talk to rival all others. Then he forced me to watch *My Little Pony* while I was at his mercy. It's just that kind of

deviousness I need him to pull together more often.”

I gaped at her. "He hogtied you?"

She tried to hold a serious face, but it only lasted a second before she started giggling. "No. But he did force me to watch *My Little Pony*. Seriously, he's a brony, and that's not something I'd ever expected to say."

I narrowed my eyes at her. It was entirely possible she was still messing with me. But it did make a disturbing amount of sense. I knew Nick was a nerd, and I knew there was a nerd following of guys who liked *My Little Pony*, but Nick was not the type of guy I expected to belong to that group.

She crossed her heart. "I promise. His little sister is huge into the show, and it's something they do together when he goes home to visit."

"I'm not sure I believe you, but go on."

Natalie tossed her empty cup in the garbage can next to us. "I know. He's too hot to like animated rainbow-colored ponies, but it was that incongruity that made me stop strutting around like God's gift to teaching English. He was sharing something with me that I had previously mocked him for, and it turned out to be fun. Clearly, I didn't know everything."

"You do still strut a little bit."

"Of course I do, I'm fabulous. But the point is that Nick is a good guy who you should totally get involved with. Especially if it stops Maggie's stalking."

My face started to get warm again, so I finished my frozen drink and tossed the cup. "I'll think about it."

“You still haven’t told me what happened in his room that has you all flustered.”

I was saved from answering by the train pulling up.

“Don’t think this lets you off. We’re going to finish the conversation before we get to the school.”

We hustled into our usual seats, but before the doors closed, a hunched over woman in a dirty *sari* with a grocery sack hobbled onto the train. The car was almost full of business women chatting in groups, and no one paid her any attention, even Natalie. She was still harassing me about Nick’s bedroom and didn’t seem to care that I was ignoring her.

The woman was having trouble getting close enough to one of the vertical metal bars to steady herself, and all the seats were taken. Our seats were directly across from the doors, so the woman was only a few feet from me. I expected her to look annoyed, but she was humming under her breath and patiently waiting for one of the business ladies to make room for her. Abishek had told me that Indian people had great respect for their elders, but I wasn’t seeing a lot of evidence of that at the moment.

I stood up in the middle of Natalie’s sentence and walked the few feet to the old woman. “*Auntie-ji?*”

She looked up at me and smiled. I pointed to my empty seat and offered her my hand to help her get there. Her smile got wider, and we got her settled with a minimum of fuss. Natalie watched us with eyebrows raised. The old woman pulled what looked like a candy bar out of her bag and offered it to me. I didn’t really want a candy bar, but it seemed rude not to take it. I thanked her and moved to the gap on the other side of

Natalie to cling to a pole there.

“Seriously, Sam? Could you be any more of a goody goody?”

“Careful. I think your head is inching its way up your ass again.”

“Touché. There may be hope for you after all. Now as I was saying, I’m going to keep coming up with dirtier and dirtier scenarios until you clue me in to reality.”

I glared at her. “Nick taught me how to fold a *sari*, then he asked me if I needed help taking it off.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Please tell me you’re paraphrasing and he didn’t actually use that line. I know I’ve taught him better than that.”

“I hate to burst your bubble, but that was verbatim. Are you happy now?”

“Yes, and terribly disappointed. Are you sure there wasn’t even any kissing? He just asked you to get naked?”

“No kissing. I’m pretty sure I’d remember that part.”

She leaned closer. “What did you do?”

“I thanked him politely and got the hell out of there. You were there for that part of my humiliation. Can we please change the subject now?”

She pouted. “Fine, but I reserve the right to come back to this topic at any time.”

I thought about the two men at the market and last night’s resolution. “I know I’m not supposed to talk about this, but I need to know. What was going on with those guys yesterday?” Her jaw clenched and I rushed ahead. “If you’re in trouble, I want to help. Please trust me, Natalie.”

“It’s not about trust. It’s about proof. The situation is potentially dangerous, so I

don't want you involved."

The announcer called our station before she could say anymore. We gathered our bags and pushed our way to the doors. The old woman in my seat put her palms together in front of her chest and mumbled *namaste* as we passed by.

She didn't look up, so I let Natalie rush me off the train. I wished I'd thought to get a quick sketch of her. I was afraid I wouldn't remember the deep wrinkles on her hands or the dark leathery skin. I didn't think I'd forget the wide gap-toothed smile though.

"You can't fix everything, you know."

"What?" I stopped short as Natalie spun around at the edge of the pedestrian overpass.

"You can't fix everything. You can give away all your money and your privileges and your time, but the world will still be effed up. The people here accept that and choose not to give away anything to those worse off than them. It's something you're going to have to learn or they will suck you dry."

"I don't think that's true."

She shook her head and took off at a brisk pace. "Oh, so you now you know everything. Well excuse me for trying to protect you."

I jogged along next to her. "I don't need you to protect me. I need you to treat me like an equal and tell me what's going on."

"Nothing's going on. I need you to do some work for my boss in the room next to mine for a few days. She's has trouble writing in English, and she's short-handed.

You'll still be tutoring Abishek in the mornings, but the afternoons you'll be with Mrs. Prasad."

I stopped for a moment and almost lost her. "Hey, you said I could have that time for my art."

She shrugged. "We all have to make sacrifices. You'll have plenty of time after we get home to try to get edgier."

Anger was a refreshing change after all the anxiety and hand-wringing I'd been doing. I grabbed Natalie's arm and hauled her to a stop just outside the language lab. The bell had already rung for class, so we were alone in the courtyard. "I'm not here to provide free labor. You could at least have asked before volunteering me."

She shrugged me off. "I forgot, and I'm sorry about that. She really needs the help, and I don't have anyone to spare. I know you spend most afternoons in that office playing on your phone, so it's not like I'm really asking you to stop working. Besides, this will give you another set of experiences to draw from."

I closed my mouth. I couldn't argue with the logic of that. Natalie took that as consent.

"Good. You start this afternoon. Try to have a good day, okay?" She punched my arm for luck and went into the building. The click, click of her heels echoed in the empty hallway until the door closed after her.

I was pretty sure I'd just been manipulated again, and she still hadn't answered my question about the two men. Hot, humid wind made my shirt flap against my sweaty back. Pressure was building in the still air, and it felt like a storm was coming. I hoped it

would get rid of some of the heat when it broke, but it seemed more likely that it would just make everything messier.

*{ not exactly nancy drew }*

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6

Natalie was already making her rounds when I came into the room. Abishek was waiting for me in what I'd come to think of as my office, so I put aside my frustration for the time being.

I dropped my bag on the desk and rubbed my eyes. "Have you ever had a conversation where you felt like someone twisted your mind around their finger without your knowledge?"

Abishek didn't answer right away, and when I dropped my hands, he looked vaguely disturbed by my imagery. "You had someone's fingers in your mind?"

"Forget it. I meant that I'm easy to convince to do things I don't want to do."

Realization dawned and he did the head wiggle. "Yes, you are."

"Great. I'm glad we're in agreement. It's my turn to pick the topic, so I have a couple of questions for you." I pulled my hastily scribbled notes out of my bag and sat back. "Question one: are you really going to let your parents arrange your marriage?"

Abishek blinked. “That is a strange question. Yes, they will arrange my marriage. I will be the third in my family. Things are done this way.”

“But don’t you want to get to know the woman you’ll spend the rest of your life with?”

He smiled. “You are shocked I think. My parents will choose a good match for me. There is no need to get to know her first.”

“What about Shulpa? I got the feeling there was a little something there between you two.”

He immediately blushed a deep red. “It is not permitted between us. She is a not *Brahmin*.”

That surprised me. I’d been under the impression that all the students at the school were *Brahmin*. “How was she going to school here then?”

He shrugged. “You would have to ask Miss Washburne. Her parents cannot afford the tuition.” He paused and fiddled with the buttons on his shirt. “She has not come home. Many are saying she was shamed.”

“Shamed?” My voice came out stronger than I’d intended, and he cringed a bit.

“The rumors say she has eloped or worse.”

I was certain my eyebrows disappeared under my bangs. “I take it eloping is bad. And what is considered worse?”

Abishek sunk down in his chair. “If she allowed herself to be raped...”

“Allowed herself to be raped?” I clenched my hands so hard my nails dug into my palms. “Last I checked, if a woman allowed it, it wasn’t rape.”

Abishek's gaze darted around the room, stopping everywhere but my face. He pressed his lips together and didn't say anything else.

I forced myself to take a deep breath. He was only seventeen, and this was a topic we'd purposely avoided. I didn't want to alienate him into spewing cultural rhetoric; I wanted to know his thoughts on the matter.

"Abishek, why do you think Shulpa would be shamed if she was raped?" I kept my voice calm and forced my hands to unclench.

He hesitated a moment before speaking. "Things are done this way. I hope that is not what happened, and I believe that if it had it would not be her fault. I also believe that it is the most likely reason she has not come back." His cheeks tinged pink again. "She did not elope."

I nodded, pacified about Abishek but worried about an Indian girl I'd never met. A sharp sting from my bottom lip reminded me that I needed to find a new nervous habit. I weighed how much I was worried against how little I could do to help and decided that I should at least try. "We should retrace her last day here."

It was Abishek's turn to lose his eyebrows into his hair. "Why?"

"She's still missing, her family is worried, and maybe some outside eyes could help."

He was already shaking his head. "She would not be able to return to her family now. Too much time has passed. Whether or not anything bad happened, her reputation is ruined."

"Ugh." I pulled my sketchpad out because I had to do something with my hands.

“No offense, but it pisses me off that her reputation is more important than her well-being.”

He shrugged again, but didn't argue with me. We sat quietly for a minute, the only sound that of my pencil scratching across paper. Abishek stared down at his hands and seemed to be having an inner debate. I let him have it. I wasn't calm enough yet to have a rational conversation with him.

Natalie came by and knocked on the door fifteen minutes before our usual end time. Mrs. Prasad wanted me back with her right after lunch, so I had to do my prep work before lunch. Abishek gathered his backpack and stood but didn't reach for the door. I put away my sketch pad and waited.

“Miss Washburne was upset when Shulpa stopped coming. I will see what I can find out about her last day here.” He didn't look back as he left the lab.

I sat back and rubbed my eyes as other students filed past the glass walls of my office for their lunches. Natalie and I usually brought our lunch because I was still refusing to eat street vendor food, and she couldn't afford to go to a restaurant every day. We'd left in such a hurry this morning that I hadn't had a chance to pack my usual peanut butter sandwich and apple.

A quiet squealing noise, like nails on glass, had me sitting up and dropping my hands. The outside door to the lab was swinging closed, but I was pretty sure someone had just dragged their nails across the glass wall of my office. An image of the two creepy boys from my first day flashed across my mind. I'd noticed them in the lab on and off since that day, always together, and I'd still gotten goosebumps every time.

There wasn't a good reason for it, but I really didn't like it when they smiled at me.

The door opened, and I jumped. Natalie leaned against the doorjamb and laughed. "Jumpy much?"

I had my hand over my racing heart. "You have no idea. What are we doing for lunch?"

"I was just about to ask you that."

I sighed. "I have a couple of granola bars stashed in my bag. I'm willing to share."

She raised a brow. "How generous. Thanks, but I'm going to hit up the fruit vendor outside the school gate." She held her hands up in front of her chest and grinned like a lunatic. "He's got huge melons."

I couldn't help it. I laughed. "You are a terrible influence on me."

She pulled me out of the office and linked her arm through mine. "Nonsense. I'm the best influence. And a wonderful person. And great in bed."

I laughed again and chose not to comment.

We split my granola bars and some apples bought from the fruit vendor. Lunch consisted of us sitting outside in the shade and talking about Mrs. Prasad. I decided not to ask about the strange men at the market or about Shulpa's disappearance in favor of relaxing and having fun before starting at yet another job.

Natalie walked me back to the lab and reminded me that I only had to work with Mrs. Prasad for two or three hours every day. I assured her I'd be fine and snuck into the room next to Natalie's lab as the bell was ringing for class. Like Natalie's room, this one

had glass enclosed offices in the corners, but the one furthest from the door was completely covered with closed mini-blinds and guarded by an older Indian woman. Students sat one to a computer in twelve neat cubicles.

Mrs. Prasad was in her sixties and wore a pinched expression above an orange and gold *sari*. Her voice had the crisp intonation of a Brit with the deep tones of a native Indian woman. I smiled and held out my hand as I approached, determined to be professional despite her disposition.

"Hello. It's nice to meet you. I'm Sam Barnes, Natalie Washburne sent me over."

She stared at my hand a moment then frowned. "I do not approve of tardiness, and your attire is sloppy and unprofessional."

After all the hassle with the tailor to bring me some new clothes, I'd still put on jeans and a t-shirt to come to the school. I resisted the urge to straighten the shirt. It wouldn't make it look less sloppy. "I apologize for my attire, but I didn't find out until I was already here that I'd be working with you."

"Do you type, Miss Barnes?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Very well. I suppose you will have to do."

She turned and walked toward her office. "At this time of year, our offices are inundated with requests for English instructors to visit companies and provide short-term tutoring services. We need all the information from these requests entered into our database, and any responses made to the companies need to be proofread before being

sent out." She glanced over her shoulder at me. "I assume you can handle these duties?"

I very much wanted to say no, or at least ask for a paycheck for all the work I was doing, but I'd already agreed to help. "Yes, ma'am."

"You will behave in a professional manner at all times. I will not tolerate a lazy work ethic or subpar morals. If you are unable to meet those standards, I will have to find someone else. You may use that office." She pointed at the office across the room, then turned and went into her own. The instructions didn't seem complete yet, so I followed.

The inside of her office was neat and without personality. There were no pictures of family or tacky posters. One pink orchid sat in a taupe pot on her desk. It was flowering, so she must take care of it. There were bookshelves along the two solid walls behind her desk filled with large fabric-bound tomes. It looked like something my mother would arrange to impress guests.

She sat in the chair behind her desk, and I realized there was nowhere else to sit. I stood with my hands clasped in front of me while she dug through a drawer. Everything looked neatly in its place, so it was possible she was trying to make me uncomfortable on purpose. It didn't seem plausible that she would have misplaced something.

I chose not to react.

Passive-aggressive tactics had no impact on me. I'd developed an immunity to them in childhood. She sat back with two file folders and a smile, and I kept my face blank.

"The first folder contains the letters that need to be entered into the database. The

second folder contains the responses that need to be typed and proofread." She handed me the folders then opened an ornate journal and began writing in it.

I waited a few beats then realized I'd been dismissed. Residual anger flared up for a moment, and I had to fight the urge to click my heels and salute. I wasn't sure she'd understand my sarcastic gestures anyway, and I'd hate for my tantrum to be less than effective.

Students hunched away from me as I strode back to the other office. I must have lost my blank face; really, I could only maintain it for short periods of time. My brother claimed I was terrible at poker. I closed my door with a quiet click. No one was going to bother me for a while.

There was a geriatric computer on the desk in my new office, but I had my laptop in my bag. There was no reason to use something obsolete when I had something awesome instead. The simple act of pulling my laptop out and turning it on relaxed me. That could not possibly be a healthy reaction, but I'd take what I could get. As my precious booted up, I flipped through the stack of response letters she'd given me.

The language was so poorly written in some sections that I could barely understand it. How could she speak fluent English but be unable to write simple sentences without major grammatical errors? Her spoken English was a crisp, almost-British accent. It didn't seem likely that she'd gone to school in England if she couldn't write. Had India still been a British colony when she'd been learning English? I needed to add questions about India's independence to my list for Abishek.

There were seventeen letters that she wanted me to type up and another hundred

at least that I had to enter into the database. I leaned back in my chair, and my computer beeped to let me know it was ready to work. I wasn't sure I was ready to work.

I set the stack of papers aside and checked my email. Four messages from my mother, six from my sister, one from my dad, and eighty-seven from spam. I erased the spam and toyed with the idea of erasing the messages from my mother and sister. I could blame it on spam, but they'd know.

I opened the email from my dad and smiled. He wasn't a man of many words. He missed me, he loved me, my mother was harassing him about getting me to email her back. The usual.

I wrote him a short message like I'd been doing every couple of days since arriving then closed the browser. The database was easy to use, so it didn't take me long to get into a groove with the data entry. I'd gotten through about third of the stack when an IM window appeared on my screen. The name was unfamiliar, and the greeting of "hi" didn't offer me any clues. I was about to close the window when the person messaged again.

*BooBerry: What do you think of Mrs. Prasad? Ice queen, right? Meet any cute boys it would be illegal for you to date in our country?*

Clearly, it was Natalie.

*Mannie: BooBerry? And how did you get my IM name?*

*BooBerry: What? I love Count Chocula. I would have his chocolate love babies if he weren't an imaginary peddler of children's cereal. Your IM was at the bottom of one of your emails.*

Mannie: *Why are you messaging me?*

BooBerry: *I notice you didn't answer the boy question. Does Nick have competition?*

Mannie: *Shut up, perv.*

I smiled. Outside my door, two girls were giggling at something near Mrs. Prasad's office. I leaned forward to check and was relieved that her blinds were still closed. I had no idea if she was in there, but I didn't want her to catch me messaging Natalie when I was supposed to be working. Not that it mattered, I wasn't getting paid anyway.

Natalie had kept typing

BooBerry: *Hellloooooo....*

BooBerry: *I refuse to ride the metro alone if you've been killed and dumped in tall grass for the pigs to eat. You'll just have to rise as a ghost or a zombie or something, I'm not picky, and escort me home.*

Mannie: *Is your English always this correct in IM?*

BooBerry: *Yes. It's a side-effect of being an English teacher. Do not ask questions to which you already know the answer.*

Mannie: *Sorry, oh great one—*

A loud thump on the glass directly in front of me had me squeaking and launching myself backward in the rolling chair. Natalie had her entire body pressed against the glass and a big smile on her face. My hand clutched my chest as if I was having a heart attack, and frankly, she was lucky that I was young and in good health. “Are you

insane?"

She nodded yes and scraped herself away from the glass to open my door. "Time to go home, worker bee."

I glanced at the clock on my computer and was surprised to see it was just past three. It felt like I'd just gotten there. "How did you even get here so fast? You just typed that response ten seconds ago."

"Magic. And also I'm quick. And you're right next to the door in here."

My heart was slowing down to its normal rhythm. "As soon as I'm no longer in danger of passing out, we can go."

She rolled her eyes as I stowed my computer in the special padded compartment of my bag and put the letter files in the top desk drawer. "I'm sure Nick would be glad to give you CPR."

"Would you stop with that? I'm not interested in Nick. The last thing I need is some guy with a hero complex and an inability to handle confrontation."

Natalie snorted and wisely stayed silent. The kids must have left during the excitement because the lab was empty. On second glance, I was pretty sure Mrs. Prasad's lights were off, so she must have snuck out at some point while I was "working."

The office doors both locked behind me, so I wasn't worried about leaving anything unsecure even if I was the last to leave. After her little stunt, I wasn't as concerned about confronting Natalie either. I looped my bag around my chest and led the way out. It would be easier if I didn't have to look at her face.

"Natalie, I need to talk to you about a couple of things that have been bothering

me lately.”

“Okay.” She sounded wary and my anxiety doubled.

We exited Mrs. Prasad’s lab to find Abishek waiting for us in the hallway. He spoke up before I could say anything more to Natalie.

“Sam, I need to talk to you.”

Natalie looked back and forth between us once then raised an eyebrow. “I think I left something in my office.” She left us alone in the hallway.

The sound of Natalie’s door closing echoed in the empty hallway. It was well past last bell, and I was pretty sure everyone else had run for the gates already. The utilities in our building were controlled automatically, so the air conditioning had turned off. The overhead fluorescent lights flickered, reminding me that the power back-up was also off. To save money, the school only kept the utilities, generators, and power-backups on during school hours. Anyone hanging around after hours was left to take their chances with the sporadic power outages rampant in Delhi.

Abishek pushed his hand through his hair and made an after you gesture toward the front doors. “I found a friend of Shulpa who said she saw Shulpa go into the new sciences building.”

I led the way out into what I’d thought would be sunshine, but the sky had gone dark and grey. It looked like I was going to get my first Indian rain. “Why would she meet someone in the new building? It’s only half done and those construction sites are dangerous.”

He peered at me from under his hair. I hadn’t noticed before, but it’d gotten long

enough to fall into his face. “They are dangerous, yes, and she did not come back.”

As if I would forget. We walked along the dirt path in silence as it veered right away from the front gates. The school was perpetually adding new buildings or remodeling the current ones. Some rich alumni living abroad had donated a bunch of money to improve the science curriculum. Natalie had complained one night over dinner about how few people donate to the humanities in comparison. She had this idea about setting up a library in her lab, but there was no money in the budget for it.

Thunder rumbled and I glanced up at the angry black clouds gathering on the Western horizon and boiling up to block the sun. Across the courtyard, the two boys I’d noticed watching Natalie watched us turn into the alley. I met the eyes of one of them and he grinned at me. I shuddered and turned away, not sure why his smile was so creepy. A humid wind rushed past us as we came out of the alley between the cafeteria and another building I wasn’t familiar with. I was still sweating even without the heat from the direct sun, and the air felt good against my damp neck.

I pulled my hair into a ponytail, and we stopped outside the orange cones marking the construction zone. It didn’t look like any construction I’d seen in the States. “Are you sure this is the right place, Abishek?”

“Yes.”

Neither of us moved closer. The building would stand alone like the rest of the complex with a narrow path leading from the central courtyard to the entrance. Most likely the path we’d taken would be the main path once it was finished and they’d pave it with stepping stones. The area inside the cones was littered with piles of dirt, stacks of

bricks, and trash. One side of the building was complete with a white plaster finish that matched the rest of the buildings, but the side closest to us looked like a giant brick oven stuffed with dozens of vertical bamboo poles. Lights were strung up on trees, poles, anything with any kind of height. The school didn't allow workers in during the day, so the majority of the work was done at night.

The wind blew my bangs into my face and I shivered even though I wasn't cold. I wasn't sure what I expected to find in there. I wasn't a detective, but it seemed stupid to just give up. Abishek was already striding past the cones, so I had to jog to catch up.

“Hey, maybe we should wait and bring someone official with us.”

He stopped and looked at me with a furrowed brow. “Official? I do not understand.”

“Someone like Natalie or Mrs. Prasad or the police.”

His brow cleared and he turned back to the building. “We are already here. It will take only a moment.”

I sighed at his back and followed him around to the completed side of the building. There were windows and a glass door in place, but they were taped up and hard to see through. Abishek tried the handle and it opened smoothly. Thunder rumbled again and I tried to imagine myself laughing about this story later with Natalie and Nick.

I reached past Abishek standing in the doorway and flicked the light switch. A dim white bulb illuminated the hallway in front of us. The floor plan appeared to be the same as that of the language lab. One long marble hallway with a stairway at the end and rooms to each side along the length. Only the hallway was lit.

“I will check the rooms to the left if you will check to the right.”

I nodded. He couldn't see me, but he seemed to think I'd agreed because he went inside and into the first room on the left. I followed suit and went into the first room on the right. Complete blackness greeted me, broken only by the square of empty floor lit by the open door. This side of the building must butt up against the incomplete brick section we'd seen from outside. The door was solid instead of glass, so I held it open as I searched the wall for the switch.

I heard a skittering noise in one of the corners and prayed that it was a rat and not a cow or worse, a giant flying cockroach. Natalie had told me that incoming storms often disturbed nests of the giant roaches and to avoid anything that made a buzzing and clacking noise. I shivered again, in revulsion this time, and my hand finally found the smooth plastic. My breath rushed out when the light revealed a piece of clear tarp to be the culprit in one of the corners. It moved again in the tiny breeze that kicked up through the open door. I would edit that part out when I told the story to Natalie later.

I took a couple of steps into the room, but it was empty and everything was covered with a thick layer of grey construction dust. No prints or suspicious markings. No clues. I retraced my steps and turned off the light. We were probably wasting our time.

In the hallway, I counted two more doors and an alcove next to the stairs. Abishek must have gone on to another room because I couldn't see him anywhere. The second door revealed a room much like the first, except no scary plastic sheeting to make me nervous. I'd just gotten to the third door when the rain started. It pounded on the

roof, and I hoped it would cool the temperature down.

The third room had a pile of the plastic sheeting to the left of the door, and I could see something pink peeking out from behind it. I took a couple of steps forward and peered around the pile. A pink phone lay face down in the dust on the other side. I crouched down and picked it up, completely shocked that I'd actually found something. The face was cracked, and when I looked at the ground around my feet, I noticed that a lot of the dust was disturbed.

I opened my mouth to call Abishek when the door slammed and I was plunged into darkness. Instead of Abishek's name, I sucked in a breath and jumped. The wind had probably closed the door. I counted to five. The power usually returned after five seconds, but it stayed out this time. The rain on the roof softened, and under it, I heard a shuffling noise behind me. I swung around, but I couldn't see anything.

I put the phone in my back pocket and reached my right hand out for the door. My nails scraped the plaster of the wall. The shuffling noise came again, and I tried not to scream. Whatever was in the room hadn't been there when I'd come in, and I had to be close to the door. I didn't want to encourage whoever or whatever it was to head in my direction.

Two steps forward brought my hand to the smooth wood of the door. The knob turned easily, and I yelled for Abishek as I spilled out into the dim hallway. I hesitated a moment, but there was no answer. Light shone around the tape on the door at the end of the hallway, and I ran as fast as I could for it. I pulled it open and barreled directly into a hard, wet chest.

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*{ the best laid plans }*

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7

Arms came around me as I bounced back, and a familiar sunshine smell stopped my flailing before it could really begin. I was out of breath and my heart was pounding, so I took a moment to calm down. The rain had settled into a steady shower, and water streamed down my face as I looked up at Nick.

“What are you doing here?” Not the most gracious opening, but I wasn’t feeling too gracious after being chased out of a building.

“I was looking for you, successfully, it would seem.” He looked over my head toward the dark hallway. “What were you doing in there?”

I pulled away from him and crossed my arms over my bag. It wasn’t much protection from the rain, but it was all I had at the moment. “Did you see Abishek? He was supposed to be in there too.”

“No. I was just about to go in when you saved me the trouble. No one else was around.”

“Okay.” I wasn’t about to go back and check the place for Abishek. He could take care of himself. I turned my back on the building and started retracing my earlier path.

Nick kept pace next to me and stuck his hands in his pockets. It was the first time I’d seen him in anything remotely work-like: jeans paired with a white button-down shirt similar to my own, his sleeves rolled up to the elbow and several buttons undone. The shirt was transparent at this point, and I was glad I’d chosen dark blue for mine.

He kept quiet until we came out of the alley and into the courtyard. “I wanted to apologize for my behavior this morning.”

That stopped me short. “Why?”

He hunched his shoulders and turned to face me. “I’m not usually so pushy with women.” A little thrill went through me at the thought that he considered me a woman and not a girl. “I got a little carried away, but in my defense, you looked beautiful in that *sari*. It addled my brain.”

I raised a brow. “Addled?”

He shrugged. “The word doesn’t get used nearly enough.”

“There’s no need to apologize. We’re both adults, and you didn’t do anything inappropriate.” I felt a blush sweeping across my cheeks as I resumed walking to the language lab.

“Good. So are you going to tell me what you were running from in that building?”

“I just got spooked in the dark.” The phone felt heavy in my back pocket, but I

wasn't ready to share my experience with him yet. I needed to talk to Natalie first. "I just have to get Natalie from her office, and we'll see you at home."

He stopped following me at my thinly veiled attempt to get him to leave. "I get it. Be careful crossing the roads."

I nodded, and he left me at the doorway of the lab. He didn't look back as he left the school grounds. I noticed that he hadn't answered the question of what he'd been doing at the new building. Abishek was gone so I couldn't ask him, but I didn't think he'd told anyone else where we were going. How had Nick found us? The thought crossed my mind that he could have been the one inside with me, and I wasn't convinced there actually had been a person in there now that I'd calmed down, but he'd been soaked through when I ran into him and his shirt had been clean. If he'd been sneaking around in a building coated in dust, there was a good chance that he'd have some sign of it on his white shirt. On top of that, the rain had started after the noises I'd heard. Logically, it didn't work. Also, I really didn't want it to be him.

The door to the lab was unlocked, but the lights were out in there too. I stuck my head in and shouted for Natalie because one panicked flight down a dark hallway was enough for the day. She shouted back and came out of her room a few seconds later. Miracle of miracles, she had two umbrellas in her hand.

"Ready to go?" She handed me a pale blue umbrella and opened her own black one.

"Yeah, and we still need to talk."

Natalie sighed and walked around the larger puddles on the path. "This isn't

about those guys again, is it? Because my answer is the same: stay out of it.”

I pulled the phone out of my back pocket and held it up for her to see. “Does this belong to Shulpa, your missing assistant?”

She tried to snatch it out of my hand, but I was faster. “Where did you get that?”

“Should I take that as a yes?”

“Yes, it belongs to Shulpa. Where did you find it?”

I shoved it back into my pocket and kept walking. “Behind a stack of plastic sheeting in the new sciences building.” I waited a moment for that to sink in. “What is going on, Natalie? Abishek thinks something bad happened to Shulpa, and the longer I’m here, the more it seems like you’re involved somehow.”

Natalie groaned. “It’s not that simple.”

I was reaching the end of my patience. “How is it not simple? Either you’re involved in the disappearance of one of your students or you’re not.”

“She’s not even officially missing. The police think she eloped.” Natalie’s hands clenched into fists, and I had the distinct impression she was angry at the police’s assessment. Not a reaction I’d expect from someone who might be in trouble.

“Well, she certainly didn’t elope without her phone.”

“You’re exactly right, and if you’d just give me the phone, I can take it to the police and tell them that.” She lunged for my butt, but I swung around to face her.

“I have a few more questions first. How are you involved in this?”

Natalie crossed her arms, no small feat while holding an umbrella. “I can’t tell you that.”

“So you are involved. Okay. Does Nick know?” She shook her head, so I moved on before she could interrupt me. “Who was Shulpa meeting the day she disappeared?”

“I have my suspicions, but I’m not going to tell you and get you involved further.”

I wanted to stamp my foot. “I’m already involved. Someone just chased me out of the building right after I found this phone.”

Natalie stopped looking annoyed and started checking me over for injuries. “Are you okay? What happened? Why didn’t you say something earlier? What were you doing in that building anyway?”

I stepped away out of arms reach and held up my hands. “Stop. I’m fine. I just discovered a newfound fear of the dark...and flying roaches.” That confused her so I started again. “Abishek and I were checking the building to see what we could find out about Shulpa’s movements on the day she disappeared.”

“I am so going to ground you.”

“Quiet.” I relayed the rest of my adventure, omitting my conversation with Nick about that morning because some things were private. “I don’t know where Abishek got to, but Nick said he didn’t see anyone.”

Natalie stared off toward the gates for a second then grimaced. “You should probably head back to the States, Sam. Your parents would never forgive me if anything were to happen to you.” She reached out and took my free hand with hers. “I would never forgive me.”

My false bravado from the afternoon was waning, and I just wanted the

confrontation to be over. I squeezed her hand then pulled the phone back out. "I'll give you the phone, but I'm not leaving. I can take care of myself. Of course, it would be easier if you would tell me everything..."

She tucked the phone away in her giant purse before responding. "I'm going to tell the police it was me in that building, so don't do anything that'll get me arrested, okay?"

I shook my head as we traversed the overpass to the metro station. "Yeah, because I'm the one involved in illegal activities."

She ignored my sarcasm in favor of checking email on her phone for the ride home. I couldn't blame her. There wasn't much else to say. My stomach growled as we were pulling into our station, and Natalie gave me the side-eye.

"Did you eat today?"

It appeared we were back on speaking terms. "Not yet. That was next on my list."

"Good. I know this great restaurant with amazing *kulfi*."

I had no idea what *kulfi* was, but I was willing to eat just about anything at that point. I pulled my wet top away from my chest and grunted.

"I want to change first."

Natalie was quiet as we walked up to our apartment, and we heard breathy conversation coming from inside. I was the first one up the steps, and I probably shouldn't have been surprised by what I found when I opened the door.

Nick was standing in front of his bedroom door, and Maggie was wrapped around

him like a scarf. Her hands were playing with the ends of his hair again, and there was maybe an inch of space between their lips. Nick's hands were curled around her arms, but I couldn't tell if it was to pull her closer or push her away. A distant part of me observed that he'd changed into dry clothes. He turned as soon as the screen squealed and set Maggie away from him.

"Sam--"

He was interrupted by Maggie's tinkling laughter. If life were fair, she'd sound like a mule, but life hated me at the moment. "Oh honey, you didn't wear that to work, did you? It looks absolutely terrible." She kept laughing as she patted Nick on his cheek. "I'll see you later, yes?"

Nick didn't respond as she walked past us out the door. Some petty part of me hoped Natalie would trip her on the stairs, but Natalie must not have been receiving my telepathic messages.

I called on my blank face again as I stepped further into the room. There was no reason for the hurt slicing through me. I'd just spent the morning convincing Natalie I wasn't interested in Nick. He'd seemed like he had better taste than that though.

Natalie marched into the room and smacked Nick soundly on the back of the head.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"For being an idiot." Natalie swung back to do it again, and Nick caught her wrist.

"You only get one." He let go of her and took a step toward me. "Sam, it

wasn't—"

I cut him off this time. "We're going out to lunch. I'm just going to change out of my absolutely terrible outfit first." I managed not to slam the bedroom door in his face.

Tears finally fell, and I couldn't stop them for a minute. I wasn't even sure why I was crying. My body had been on a nonstop roller coaster ride since before dawn, and I really just wanted to take a nap. I remembered Nick's apology from only an hour ago and imagined Maggie as the real reason behind the effort. The hurt was washed out by anger. As much as I wanted to leave my wet clothes crumpled on the floor, I couldn't. They'd mildew, and I'd be angry at myself later instead of Nick, which was simply not acceptable. I hung them in the bathroom, washed my face, and changed into capris and a t-rex shirt that proclaimed me a lover not a biter. I pulled my hair back into a wet ponytail and left the room calm if not happy.

Natalie sprang up from the couch. "Nick is coming with us. He offered to buy us a late lunch."

I forced a smile and vowed to order every expensive thing on the menu as I grabbed my damp messenger bag. "Excellent. I'm starving."

We went to a little restaurant with five tables and one guy manning a wok. The whole meal was awkward because I wasn't in the mood to talk to Nick. He tried to get me into conversation, but one word answers were hard to ignore. The food was good, and my stomach finally stopped growling at inopportune moments.

Natalie said she had plans that afternoon, and I wasn't in the mood to follow her around playing spy versus spy. Nick offered to take me to popular park he knew about

with interesting statues, and I was tempted for a few seconds, but flashes of the last time Nick "helped" me with the *sari* followed by images of Maggie wrapped around him zipped through my mind. Spending time alone with him wasn't worth the potential sketches. I could find the park on my own another time. Instead, I convinced Nick I wanted to go home and nap. It was mostly true. I didn't know, and didn't care, what he did once I closed my bedroom door. My life was complicated enough without his and Maggie's drama clogging it up.

I shucked my jeans on the floor again and lasted an entire four seconds before picking them back up and putting them in the laundry hamper. The room was stuffy, as usual, so I turned on Natalie's fan as well as my own. They generated enough of a breeze to keep the sweat only lightly trickling down my back. Instead of Nick's park, I decided I'd work on the sketches I'd already started. Thanks to Mrs. Prasad and Abishek, I hadn't had a chance to work on my art all day. I pulled my sketch pad out of my bag and sat cross-legged against my headboard. It only took a few minutes for me to relax into the familiar motions and forget about the stress of the day.

A few hours later, my eyes were gritty and it was getting hard to concentrate. I didn't bother with any covers, just set my sketches on the floor, lay on my bed in my underwear, and closed my eyes. The fans and the setting sun cooled the room down to comfortable, and I fell asleep.

I knew I was dreaming. Madeline, my older sister, was standing next to my bed in her best pastel sweater set fanning me with a palm leaf. She was lecturing me about my poor life choices, but it was like her voice was coming through a tunnel of water. I

focused and realized I couldn't actually make out any words; I'd just assumed she was berating me from the look on her face.

The dream took a strange turn when a chocolate pig with porcupine spines snuffled by. I abandoned my sister mid-tirade, something I'd always wanted to do in real life, and followed after the pig. The chocolate spines looked delicious. It opened its mouth and a strange ringing melody came out.

I woke up to Natalie poking me in the ribs and the sun blinding me. "Wha?"

"Time for breakfast. You missed dinner, and I'm afraid you're going to waste away if I don't start feeding you regular meals." She shoved a tray at me as I sat up in bed. "Eggs, toast, OJ. Nick made it, so you have to eat it or he'll get upset. And don't go hungry just to be ornery."

I grunted and started shoveling food into my mouth. Thank God for pushy roommates. "What time is it?"

"Seven. You have time to shower and put on some makeup before we dress you up in your *salwar*. At least you've taken to sleeping in our bedroom again."

"Funny. The couch saved me from melting that first night. It's ugly, but it's comfortable."

She stopped hovering and retreated to her bed once I'd eaten half my plate. "Well that's accurate, if somewhat insulting."

I gulped some OJ and lifted a brow. "Did you pick it out?"

"Hell no. It was here when I moved in. But it grows on you."

"Yeah, like fungus."

She snorted out a laugh and pulled her hair back into a ponytail. "I knew you'd come out of your shell eventually."

"The shell is for your protection."

"Please, I was raised on a snarky knee. Nothing you say can affect me."

I raised a brow. "I'll be sure to remind you of that at an undisclosed later date."

"I like you so much better this way." She grinned at me.

I threw my pillow at her. "I'm not sure I'm going to wear the *salwar*. I'd probably be more comfortable in my own clothes, though I should probably wear something other than jeans."

She clapped her hands together and bounced a little. "Do I get to pick out your outfit?"

I finished the last of the OJ and put the tray aside. "No. I have clothes in mind already. Contrary to what you seem to believe, I do have some fashion sense."

"Well excuse me." She leaned back on her bed, grinning fiendishly. "Is it low-cut and dirty?"

I closed the bathroom door on her question, but I could still hear her clearly. I smiled. It was too bad I'd ended up with Madeline as a sister instead of Natalie. I could hear her making wolf whistles in the bedroom.

The shower washed away the last of my fatigue, and I noticed a few twinges in my legs that let me know they didn't appreciate sprinting without a warm-up. I didn't take long with my makeup and hair, mostly because I had a run-your-hands-through-and-forget-it haircut. My stylist was forever frustrated by my lack of imagination, but she

keeps saying hope springs eternal.

Natalie argued with me the entire time I was getting dressed, and I ended up in the pale green *salwar* instead of the sundress I'd decided on. I was right about it being way more comfortable in the heat. The tailor had given me the version with straight leggings instead of the gathered kind that looked like Hammer pants. The more I moved in it, the more I liked it. We walked into the living room and found Maggie in her usual position invading Nick's personal space.

Nick stepped back from Maggie as soon as our door opened, but it didn't change Maggie's smirk. I thought they were talking about me, but I got a good look at Nick's face when he turned to say good morning to us. Maggie may have been enjoying the moment, but his clenched jaw spoke otherwise. He looked like he'd gladly toss her over a cliff, but I wasn't willing to forgive and forget just yet.

Maggie smoothed the skirt of her yellow sundress and tossed her hair back. "Look at us, all professional-like. That's how you phrase it in Texas, right?"

I got the feeling she was trying to insult my home state, but the only one not from Texas was her. "Yep. That's how we say it. How nice of you to use a dialect we'd understand." Despite our conversation in the bedroom, Natalie looked surprised when I spoke up. Was I really that much of a doormat?

Maggie smiled as she turned her attention on me. It wasn't a nice smile. "Nice outfit. You know some Indian people consider it insulting when us Westerners wear their clothes. I only tell you this because I'm concerned, of course. Good luck today." She turned and sauntered out into the heat. I was pretty sure she meant die in a fire when she

said good luck. At that point, I didn't so much care. It felt good to drop the politeness filters for once. Maybe I'd do it more often.

"We could hire out a hit on her. With the low labor costs here, it'd be super cheap. I'd help you hide the body," Natalie said.

I glanced at her. She was staring after Maggie intently again. "You, my friend, need less violent hobbies."

Nick had escaped into the kitchen while Maggie was posturing, so I made an after-you gesture at Natalie. The commute was the same as the day before, and Abishek was waiting for me in the lab as usual. I asked him where he disappeared to the day before, and he claimed I was already gone by the time he finished searching the rooms. He didn't seem inclined to pursue the topic further, so I let it drop. Maybe I was a doormat after all.

Abishek launched into a description of his older brother's wedding, and I let him dominate the conversation. I considered pushing him about it just to prove a point, but I'd been the one to convince him to look into it yesterday. Besides, after my experience in the building, I didn't want him involved any more than he already was. Natalie had said something similar to me during our conversation in the rain, and I suddenly had a better understanding of her position.

The morning went by quickly. Natalie had a meeting with a student during lunch, so I worked on my sketches until it was time to go next door. Like last time, Mrs. Prasad didn't appear when I entered the room. It still looked clean and neat. Nothing was out of place, no trash littering the cubicles, no stray graffiti from bored kids. I wondered if that

was from fear of Mrs. Prasad or a cultural thing I didn't understand. High school students in America would have made the space "their own" through strategically placed vandalism.

"Ms. Barnes." I jumped a little at the voice behind me. The woman must have been a ninja in another life.

I turned and smiled. "Hello, Mrs. Prasad."

She took a long look at my outfit and led me to her office. I stood in front of her desk and tried not to fidget with my *salwar*. Maggie's insidious comments circled through my head, and I tried not to let them make me anxious. After a moment of making me sweat, she leaned her elbows onto her desk and eyed my clothing again. "You had very specific instructions about appropriate work attire."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I am glad to see you are making more of an attempt to adhere to those instructions."

I almost deflated right there, and I suspected she knew that because she smiled at me for the first time.

"You have work to do, yes?"

I nodded and escaped. The rest of the work day went by quickly. Natalie pestered me through IM, and I told her about Mrs. Prasad's approval of my outfit. Score one for Team Texas.

Fifteen minutes before the lab closed, Mrs. Prasad smiled at me as she walked past my room. I smiled back, but I wasn't feeling it. Natalie was doing her best to keep

me entertained, but I couldn't stop thinking about Nick and Maggie and scary dark buildings. My pulse sped up every time I remembered being closed in that room and not knowing who or what was in there with me. Mother seemed convinced that I couldn't handle situations outside of my control, and my reaction bothered me.

We were halfway home before Natalie pounced.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing." I was aware I sounded like a sullen teenager, but I couldn't seem to help it.

"Today was a good day, and we're going to make Maggie eat her words. Why aren't you smiling?"

I shook my head. "That's what's bothering me. Nick and Maggie and scary things and maybe Mother was right after all. Honestly, I'm a little bit terrified."

Natalie was holding up three fingers. "Okay, let's tackle this one issue at a time. Scary things. I'm assuming you're talking about what happened yesterday. It was a fluke, and you handled yourself beautifully. You stayed calm, you removed yourself from the situation, and you got help." She pulled one finger down.

"That...makes sense. It scares me when you make sense."

She ignored me. "Two, you're afraid your Mother is right. No offense, but your mom is kind of a controlling nutcase."

I sighed. "I'm aware."

"But that doesn't mean you can't have control over your own life. See point A above. I know she wants you to settle down with a nice man under her thumb forever,

but there's no reason you can't have a career you enjoy as well as a husband and two-point-five kids. Assuming you want half a kid. Personally, I want whole kids or none at all."

I almost had trouble following her. "That's not the entire problem with Mother."

"I know, but you're clearly able to exert control when you want to. I just said this. Pay attention."

She pointed the last finger at me. "Third, Nick is a good guy, and Maggie is a raging bitch of the highest order. Problem solved."

I smacked her pointing finger away. "Problem not solved. Every time I enter a room Maggie is clinging to Nick, and you can't deny that Nick never bans her from the apartment."

"Yeah, but neither do I. Why aren't you mad at me too?"

"Because Nick isn't making kissy faces with you."

"Aha! I knew you had the hots for Nick."

I rolled my eyes and tried to calm my rising panic. "What are we, in high school? Nick is an attractive man with an unfortunately fickle personality."

Natalie lost the teasing note in her voice. "Alright, enough of this. Let me give you some background on Maggie. She only works for our agency because her daddy got her the job. He works for some big company here as an ex-pat, and he wants her to do something to earn all the money she spends on his credit card. She loves to cause trouble because, in her words, she's stuck here and bored."

She was jabbing me with her finger again, so I grabbed her hand. "That's very

enlightening, but what does it have to do with me?"

"Nick. Doesn't. Want. Maggie." Natalie was trying to pull her hand away with every word, and I didn't feel like getting into a wrestling match so I released her. "She only finds him interesting because he refuses to get involved with her. She passes the time trying to get him to change his mind, and he lets her because he doesn't know how to get her to back off without hurting her feelings."

"This is not helping your case. I'm not getting involved with some guy I met halfway around the world who already has lady drama."

She threw her hands up in frustration. "Fine. How am I supposed to live vicariously through you if you won't at least take pictures of Nick in a towel for me?"

I giggled. "Take your own pictures. It's not like he's modest. He walks around the apartment half-dressed."

She giggled back and lifted a brow. "Yeah, now he does."

Natalie had made her points and the train was pulling into our station, so I let it go. She'd convinced me to at least stop worrying about the situation. I didn't see Nick again for the rest of the week. We were all busy because of Dusshera, an upcoming holiday that I couldn't pronounce. Something to do with burning demons in effigy, though logic dictated that if one was going to off a demon, fire would be the least effective method.

Dusshera fell on a Thursday, so the school closed early and gave everyone a four-day weekend. Natalie made plans to go to a parade and party with some of the other teachers. She tried to get me to come along, but I wanted some time to myself so I

declined. Nick was still absent when she left Thursday afternoon to meet up with the others.

People were going crazy in the streets, lighting firecrackers, joining impromptu parades, fasting or feasting or dancing under the light of the full moon. I wasn't actually too sure of that last bit. There was a chance Abishek told me that just to mess with me.

I pulled the curtains back and glanced out the window at the darkening street. There were people holding candles and dancing in the twilight, so maybe it was legit after all. It struck me as a fire hazard, but since I had no plans to join them, I wasn't going to shoo them away.

Natalie had made me promise not to go out by myself after dark. I didn't care where Nick was as long as he wasn't at the apartment. It was nice to have the place to myself for once. After the crazy roommate debacle, Dad had given me the option of moving home or getting my own apartment. I'd stared at him in horror and taken the first apartment we looked at. Seven hundred square feet of space all to myself. It was glorious.

I slumped onto the couch and stared at the blank TV. For once, I wasn't feeling the urge to work on my art. I could watch a movie. I'd brought my collection with me. Or I could catch some Hindi TV. Or I could scrub my toilet. All good options. What would I be doing in America? Probably watching TV or a movie or scrubbing my toilet. My life was kind of pathetic.

My poor little bamboo plant had water, but I still hadn't done any research on how to help it get better. It didn't look worse, but half of it was still brown and crunchy.

I wanted it to be happy. I was trying to make myself happy too, but it felt like a lot of work. Everything in India felt like a lot of work, but the thought of what awaited me back in the States was just as daunting. A double major was going to be twice as much work, which would come directly from my time for my art. If this little experiment didn't work, I wasn't sure what else I could do to push myself. At some point, I was going to have to get a job and start paying my own bills. I wasn't aware of any jobs looking for an artist who couldn't sell any paintings. Was my mother right that I was wasting my life?

Firecrackers burst outside, and my phone rang. Not my India phone, as I'd come to think of it, my American phone with the outrageous international rates. I checked the display and groaned. It was like thinking about her encouraged her to call. The dark powers were strong with this one. I closed my eyes and answered the phone.

"Hello, Mother."

*{ good girls just say no }*

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8

She didn't wait to start lobbing guilt like a pro. "I know you're busy with your new life, so I just wanted you to know that I don't mind not hearing from you on my birthday."

Crap. I'd forgotten yesterday was her birthday. "I'm sorry, Mother. I've been very busy here and not paying much attention to the calendar."

"I understand, dear. Your sister made me a lovely two tier cake with those darling sugar flowers she does. Her boys were wonderful when they came for dinner, and John was his charming self, as usual."

I cringed. John was my brother-in-law, and I had nothing against him other than that my mother wanted me to marry his clone. "I'm sure they were. Listen, Mother, I was just--"

"You know, at your age, Madeline was eight months pregnant with her youngest. Don't worry, dear, there's still time for you, as soon as you forget this silly notion of

living in the wilderness and sowing your oats."

"That's not really--"

"Honestly, I'm not sure what goes through your head when you get ridiculous ideas like this. When you decided to major in art instead of secondary education like we wanted it was bad enough, but India is no place for polite young women to live."

"Dad said--"

"Oh I know your father says he supports these hare-brained notions you get, but it's high time you came to your senses and settled down. I was so relieved when your father said you'd finally come to your senses about school at least."

My head started to pound, so I rubbed my temple with my free hand and tried to get a word in. "I don't want--"

"That's the problem; you focus too much on what you want and not enough on how your actions affect other people."

"Other people being you and Madeline?"

She sniffed. "And what's wrong with that? A good daughter considers her family when making decisions. Madeline is doing a fine job raising her boys and taking care of John's home. She volunteers at the club and chairs the Spring Festival every year. The entire community raves about her and that reflects well on all of us."

I couldn't seem to unclench my jaw, but I tried to speak anyway. "I don't care how perfect Madeline is. I'm not Madeline. I don't want to host bake sales and iron shirts and make charming blankets out of leftover baby clothes."

"Well of course you don't. You never could sew to save your life. Bless your

clumsy fingers."

"That's not the point, Mother. I want my own life with my own decisions and my own consequences. My choice to major in art wasn't a lark, it was a career decision. I may not be able to sell anything now, but one day soon I'll pay my own way without your help."

"That's just silly. We'd love to help you, dear. If you'd just come home, we could talk to Pastor Davies about that church secretary position he mentioned."

In all my years, I'd never figured out how to get through to my mother. She just bulldozed over everything I said, if she let me speak at all, and ordered my life to her liking. It was easier to avoid the confrontation entirely. "Happy Birthday, Mother. Give the family my love."

"Wonderful. I'll contact Pastor Davies this afternoon. He'll be--"

My phone was snatched away from me before I could say no again. I opened my eyes and sat up to see Nick leaning over the back of the couch speaking to my mother.

"Hello, Mrs. Barnes. I'm Nicholas Webster. She's going to have to call you back at a later time. It was nice meeting you." He hung up before even she could respond.

My head was still pounding when he handed the phone back to me, but I wasn't sure if it was impotent rage at my mother or Nick. "What is your problem?"

He circled the couch and sat down next to me. "You looked like you needed a break from the conversation, and she wasn't let you talk anyway."

My mouth dropped open a little. "How long were you eavesdropping?"

"I came in right after 'Listen, Mother.' You were too busy trying to rub a hole in

your head to notice."

"I don't need you to protect me from my family. I don't need you to give me sweatshirts and pay my bills and flash your perfect abs and smile at me while Maggie crawls into your pants."

He smiled then. "You noticed my abs?"

"That's the part you focus on? You're just as bad as my mother." He winced, and I attempted to make a dignified exit by standing up. I got dizzy and promptly fell back onto the couch.

He leaned forward and put his hand on my arm. "Are you okay?"

I decided I was not only a magnet for personalities that wanted to control me, but also cursed by some unknown Hellfiend. "I'm fine. I just stood up too fast, plus my mother sucks the life out of me whenever we talk." I shrugged off his hand. "It's none of your business anyway."

"I want it to be my business."

I goggled at him for a second. "Really? That's the line you're going with? Did it work with Maggie?"

He threw his hands in the air, the first real sign of emotion I'd seen from him.

"What is your obsession with me and Maggie? She wants me because she can't have me, and she enjoys making life hard for the people around her. It's like her hobby."

"Why do you let her do it?"

"Let her? I just try to stay out of her way. I don't understand women on the best of days, and she scares me." He shuddered dramatically, and my lips twitched toward a

smile.

The sun had set completely, leaving us with only the quick bursts from outside for light. Nick put his arm behind my shoulders on the couch, and I could smell sunshine again. It smelled like home. I wanted to press my face into his shoulder and inhale.

I took a shallow breath instead. "You looked pretty understanding from what I saw."

"She only drapes herself over me when she thinks you're about to come into the room. Trust me, it's entirely for your benefit."

I tried to read his face, but I could only make out his silhouette in the darkness. "You could stop her. Tell her no."

Clothing rustled as he moved closer. "Like you tell your mom no."

"It's different," I whispered. I could feel his breath across my face. I was afraid to inhale. Afraid to move. Afraid he'd back away and afraid he wouldn't. Excitement fizzed through my body.

"It's not different, Sam. And it bothers you just as much. Why is that, do you think? Why does Maggie flirting with me bother you so much if you don't give a damn?"

"I never said I didn't give a damn." Beyond that, I didn't have an answer for him. Maggie was a pro at using Nick to get to me. In admitting that, I had to admit that Nick wasn't at fault for my reactions to Maggie. I waited for him to lean forward just a bit more and finish what he'd started.

We both breathed into the silence, and I could faintly taste mint. Then he tucked my hair behind my ear and moved away. I was glad it was dark because I could feel the

heat in my cheeks and down my neck. Thank goodness I hadn't forged ahead myself.

I filled my lungs and regretted it when his scent filled me as well. His arm tightened around me, and I leaned my head against his shoulder.

"This is a terrible idea." I was proud that my voice was steady.

"I know."

We didn't say anything else for a long while. The revelers carried on outside, but their flashes moved away. Neither of us bothered to turn on a light. I was fine with that. The darkness offered a level of protection. I could pretend I was at home if I was so inclined. I could pretend we didn't have drama between us. I could pretend that I was confident in my new, edgy perspective as an artist.

I must have tensed up because Nick started rubbing my arm with gentle strokes. "Sam, you intrigue and attract me. I get that you're not ready to trust me yet. And that's fine because I don't want to be someone you just pass time with until the next opportunity comes along. Can you give me a chance, at least?"

I nodded. It was a novel idea. Me passing time until the next opportunity comes along. I closed my eyes and relaxed against Nick. A small part of me hoped Maggie would walk in for a bit of payback, but the rest of me just wanted to sleep without worries plaguing me. Maybe I could pass time just for the night.

I didn't remember falling asleep, but then, who does. I did remember waking up splayed over Nick on the couch. He was lying on his back with his arms around me, and I was tucked between him and the back of the couch. No one was screeching or demanding we explain. It was blessedly quiet, and a soft light was wavering around the

edges of the drapes.

My cheek was pressed against his chest so I rose and fell with each deep breath. I'd had very little experience with the awkward morning after, and even less when that morning after didn't involve happy naked time. It wasn't awkward yet, but I was pretty sure that if I tried to slide over him to get up it would get plenty awkward. I didn't have the necessary spider monkey skills to scale the couch.

I considered hopping up and playing it off like nothing had happened, but I was really comfortable, and we didn't have anywhere to be. It was a nice morning. I relaxed back down, and Nick's chest rumbled underneath me.

"Decided to get a close up feel on my abs, huh?"

I sat up and smacked his shoulder. "No. I'm getting up now."

He tucked his hands behind his head and grinned. "Go ahead, I'll wait here."

I did not smile. "Move."

He rolled off the couch, which was good for him because I had the leverage and intention of seeing him faceplant onto the ground.

"This didn't mean anything." I gestured between the two of us.

"Yes it did. It meant you trust me at some level and you like my abs."

I edged toward my bedroom door. "Why won't you just take no for an answer?"

"Because I don't want Maggie or your fears to be the reason you say no."

"My fears are a great reason to say no."

He followed me to my door. I pressed my back against the wood and he moved close enough that I could feel his body heat. He put both palms against the door next to

my head. We weren't touching, but we might as well have been from the warmth rushing through my body.

"Tell me no now," he whispered. I could have avoided his approach. He leaned down slowly enough, but my heart was pounding. And I wanted to finally be the edgy risk-taker I was in India to become.

His lips were soft against mine, and I wanted to melt. It was a surreal experience. I watched him watching me, and neither of us moved. It was Nick that broke the moment. His hands slid around to my back and pulled me against him. I groaned in relief as he deepened the kiss. It wasn't my first rodeo, and I wanted to release some of that delicious tension we were building up.

The screen door crashed open, and I grabbed handfuls of Nick's shirt in two fists. We froze, then Nick dropped his forehead against mine.

"Ha! I knew I just had to leave you two alone long enough."

Nick gave me a little half smile then moved away. "Natalie, you have impeccable timing. I'm going to go take a shower."

I slumped against the door as Natalie came into the room and Nick left it. It seemed like fate was conspiring against me lately. Maybe it wasn't such a bad thing if it kept my hormones from taking over again. I imagined I'd be doing a lot of painting that day as a means of controlling the urges.

Natalie came over and smacked my arm, and it occurred to me that we were all really violent people. "Tell me everything. Every naked detail."

I shook my head. "There are no naked details."

She raised a brow. "Oooo, so you couldn't even wait to get his clothes off first. Hot."

"What happened to thinking of him like a brother?"

"I said it would be like kissing a brother, not that I thought of him as such. I have regular naked thoughts about him. Did my thoughts live up to reality?"

"Nothing happened. Something was about to happen, but you stopped that pretty effectively."

Natalie slapped a hand over her mouth. "God, I'm sorry. I am a horrible friend."

"No. I'm glad you interrupted. It would have been a mistake." I finally managed to work the knob and get the bedroom door open. Natalie followed me inside.

"Why? You looked pretty content. You're not still caught up on Maggie are you?"

I collapsed on my bed and buried my face in my pillow. "No." Natalie pulled the pillow away, so I elaborated. "He had his hands on me for maybe ten seconds and I was ready and willing to do whatever he wanted me to do. Hell, I was about to suggest it. I still might suggest it. This is not me."

Natalie sat next to me on the bed and patted my head. "Poor baby. She's getting what she wanted, an authentic non-vanilla experience, and she's afraid because it's different."

"It's not the same." I listened to myself echo my words to Nick the night before and wondered why it wasn't. "I don't want to make irresponsible decisions just to prove that I can. Getting involved with Nick would be supremely irresponsible."

She pulled back and gave me the stink eye. "Do you even listen to yourself? There's a lot more to life than being responsible. You wanted to experience things that elicited emotion and made grand gestures. I'm not saying to jump into bed with him unless you're absolutely sure, but getting involved with him should be so much more than that anyway. Let go of your uptight fears, experience Nick, and paint what you feel."

I put the pillow back over my head. "Go away and make sense to someone else."

"Fine. But I'm coming back in a couple of hours and we're going to dinner. All of us. I may even invite Maggie, just to see how she reacts to Nick making cow eyes at you across the table."

I tossed the pillow at her but it only hit the closing door. My stomach was churning with anxiety about my life. It was easy for Natalie to be the voice of reason when she was already able to take chances. She'd come to India, after all. Then again, it wasn't a reckless risk. It was a career choice for her too. She planned to go home after her contract was over and teach ESL to high school kids. She already had the teaching certificate, but she wanted to experience life in a foreign country before trying to empathize with students dealing with culture shock. She talked about it all the time on the train.

Now that I've struck The Deal, I had a similar opportunity. I wasn't even sure I liked high school kids enough to want to work with them all day on a permanent basis. Abishek was really the only one here I spent any time with. Josh was in high school, but there was no way I could teach his lazy butt. As much as it pained me, maybe having

some kind of back-up career would be good. Even if my paintings improved, there was no guarantee I'd be able to make a living off of them. Looking at it like that, I was already well on the way to a pretty risky life choice. Why not take some smaller chances first?

I sighed and folded my arms under my head. I didn't want to make a bad decision and waste years of my life, but either way could be a bad decision in hindsight. Tell Nick yes or no, paint or teach, stay or go. I pulled out my painting supplies and a few of the sketches I'd finished. The last choice had been in the back of my mind since the incident in the empty building, but I hadn't realized it until just now. I moved aside my bamboo plant so I could work at my desk. I set up an easel and a palette while I assessed the idea of going home.

My parents would be ecstatic if I left early, but did I feel like I'd met my goals for coming to India in the first place? The memory of Nick pressed against me marked a definitive no. I craved more experiences like that, even when they sent me running. Some of my anxiety eased as I settled into that decision. I was staying, no matter how scary it got.

A couple of hours later, Natalie returned with a bag of scarves. I'd painted for a long while and slept a little bit, but I hadn't felt like doing anything other than lazing around in bed once I'd woken up. She tossed the plastic bag on her bed and started digging through it.

"I found the perfect thing for you."

I was watching her out of one eye, the rest of my face was obscured by the pillow.  
"Cadbury Creme Eggs available out of season?"

"No, but I'll keep my eye out for that. Cadbury chocolate is popular here, so it makes sense that they'd have Crème Eggs too." She pulled a long swath of material out of the mass with a flourish. It was pale green and gold, and it sparkled just a little. I liked it, and it matched my *salwar*.

I pulled myself away from my pillow and sat cross-legged on the bed. "Good choice. Now riddle me this: why do you have a bag of scarves?"

"They were on sale for Dusshera, and I still needed some Christmas presents to send home. Scarves are cheap and light, so they don't cost a lot for postage and I'm not out a lot of money if they get stolen en route." She started pulling out scarves and waving them around like a demented belly dancer.

"Dusshera is today right? That's why everyone's gone insane with the fireworks?"

"Mhmm. What do you think?" She pulled a vibrant purple scarf across the lower half of her face just below her eyes.

"I think you'd make a terrible bedouin, and I'm going back to sleep." I curled back into the covers with my back to Natalie.

"Well that's just mean." She pulled the covers off of me and stood with her hands on her hips. "Don't make me get out the emergency cookie stash."

I sat up again. "We have an emergency cookie stash?"

"Yes. It's hidden. For emergencies only, hence the name."

"That is a very ineffective threat."

She grabbed a pair of jeans and a flowy green tunic top that matched my new scarf off the floor. "Get dressed. We're going to dinner."

My stomach growled on cue. Natalie tossed the clothes onto the bed, and then stood there with her arms crossed.

"You're going to stand there and watch me get dressed?" I asked.

"Yep."

"Perv."

"Hobo."

I fiddled with the top. "Can't I just eat the cookie stash for dinner?"

"First, your mother would have me killed. Second, I already let you spend all day in bed when you could have been shopping for scarves with me. Third, I already invited Maggie so I need you with us to stop me from stabbing her with my fork. Fourth--"

I held up a hand. "Alright, I'm convinced. Far be it for me to stand by when I could prevent a homicidal forking incident."

I dressed in the outfit she'd picked out, and she draped the scarf over my neck. Her smile was too smug for my liking. Natalie was devious, and her insistence was severe for something as simple as dinner. She pulled the door open, and I had second thoughts as I followed her into the living room.

"Look, Natalie, I'm not really feeling up to going out tonight, especially not with Mag--" I stopped mid-thought as I noticed the farce unfolding before me.

Nick was right. It was like she had some kind of radar for when I'd enter a room.

She must have timed it wrong though, because Nick was slowly circling the couch as Maggie pursued him from the other side. They were moving at a walk, but it was obvious that Maggie was trying to get within arm's reach of Nick and equally as obvious that Nick was trying to keep some distance between them for once.

Maggie had her back to us on our side of the couch when we walked out of the bedroom, and I couldn't help but zero in on her fabulous shoes again. She was wearing four-inch heels in a sparkly pink-gold color. The rest of her outfit was the usual Maggie. Dark skinny jeans and a sleeveless blouse in pale pink. Her dark hair was shaped into a fancy twist. She looked sleek and beautiful, and I hated her for making it look easy.

They continued their circle around the couch, and Nick came into my line of sight. He wasn't wearing anything from the waist up, again, and his hair was wet. I thought for a second that she'd actually chased him out of the shower naked. A thrill shot up my spine at the view, but the reality of the situation was too strange for me to properly appreciate it.

He spotted me and Natalie and relief flashed across his face. "Thank god."

It was sad that he felt like he needed us to rescue him. The thrill was gone, replaced by pity and the beginnings of anger. "What is the matter with you two?"

Maggie started and turned toward us, a small smile curled around her mouth. "Nick and I were just having a private discussion."

I raised a brow. "You were chasing him around the couch." Her smile faded, and I turned on Nick. "And you, Abs McGee, put some damn clothes on. This isn't your personal harem."

"What? I...what?" He stopped circling, but Maggie stayed where she was. Guess I'd ruined her surprise.

Maggie recovered first. "Nick and I were thinking of passing on dinner tonight. It would be so nice to have an evening alone together."

Natalie snorted next to me. "Nice try. Nick is coming to dinner with us."

Maggie turned pleading eyes on Nick and took a step toward him. "I've been lonely lately. Can't you spare me one evening?"

Natalie stepped between Nick and Maggie before she could advance anymore. "Back, nag-dragon." She brandished her hand like she was carrying a sword. I wondered if she'd try to slay Maggie with the power of her mind. It wouldn't be the first time. Not even the first time that week. I leaned back against the wall and waited to see how this would unfold.

"Nick, get dressed. Maggie, if you're so lonely, I'm willing to stay here with you and keep you company. Of course, Nick and Sam would have to find the restaurant on their own, but I'm sure they could manage."

Maggie narrowed her eyes, but Nick stopped her before she could start. "We're all going to dinner. Natalie is making an effort to be friendly to you, Maggie, so you can try to enjoy her company for one meal. Especially since you're so lonely."

I was impressed. My mother couldn't have manipulated that any better. Nick retreated to his room while he had the chance. To my disappointment, he was wearing the same low-riding sweats he'd been in before. Maggie didn't offer any more objections. She grabbed her phone off the table and stalked outside. I could hear her speaking

quietly in the courtyard.

The tension dissipated pretty fast once Maggie was gone. Natalie started digging through her purse and muttering about chapstick, so I felt safe in staring at Nick's closed door without her commenting. It was the first time I'd seen him defy Maggie.

I shifted my gaze to Natalie and remembered her smug smile from earlier.

"Natalie?"

"What?"

"What are you hoping to achieve with this dinner?"

She looked up from her purse. "World domination."

I tried a different tact. "You used Maggie to convince me to come. You used me to convince Maggie to come. What did you use to convince Nick to come?"

She waved my question away and went back to digging. "Oh, I just told him you were going and he was in."

I pushed away from the wall and approached Natalie. "So you did have to convince all of us to go. What are you planning?"

She straightened up and uncapped her chapstick. "I want to prove that I can be social with Maggie and that you and Nick can't keep your hands off each other. And like I said earlier, it'll be fun to taunt Maggie about Nick making cow eyes at you."

I rubbed my hand over my eyes. "I'm pretty sure that taunting Maggie during dinner will not help your attempt to be social with her."

She shrugged. "Social doesn't have to mean nice. It's more fun if *someone* has a tantrum during dinner. I elected her."

My mother would be horrified. I was a little horrified. "Were you raised in the circus?"

She smiled, smacked her glossy lips at me, and tossed her chapstick back in her bag. "Nope. I just watched a lot of daytime soaps. D'you think Maggie has an evil twin somewhere? Or would she be the evil twin?"

I shuddered. "The thought of two Maggies is going to give me nightmares."

Nick sauntered out of his room, saving us from further contemplation. He'd changed into jeans and a threadbare t-shirt that featured a rat-person-thing yelling "You no take candle!" I wasn't in on the joke, but I recognized the logo from one of my brother's favorite video games. No doubt they'd get along great.

He smiled, and I moved away before he could put his hand on my back to urge me forward. The last thing I needed was to get jumpy from him touching me. Natalie giggled but tried to cover it badly with a fake coughing fit. I glared at her.

Nick glanced back and forth between us. "What's going on? Natalie, did you scare off Maggie?"

Nothing could have cooled my ardor faster. Well, maybe walking in on him and Maggie naked together, but that was pretty far-fetched at the moment.

"She's waiting outside with her precious cell phone. Probably setting up a quick escape." She took Nick's hand and her expression became serious. "Nick, if a man asks you to get in his van later, tell him no."

He rolled his eyes and shook her off.

I cleared my throat and tried not to laugh. "So, where are we eating?"

Natalie rubbed her hands together and grinned. "Pirates of Grill. It's a rotisserie place where they give you skewers over a charcoal grill at your table."

I groaned. There was a better than average chance that someone was going to end the night with second-degree burns.

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*{ my own pineapple guy }*

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9

The restaurant was just south of Delhi in one of the suburbs, so we all piled into the taxi that Natalie insisted on paying for. Nick slid into the front before Maggie could argue about seating arrangements. The hair on the back of my neck stood up as we were climbing into the car, and I hesitated so I could take a quick look around. Nothing suspicious stood out, but it felt like someone was watching us. People were gathered in groups up and down the street, and some were staring in our direction, but they didn't account for the scary vibe I was feeling.

It reminded me of my race down the hallway, and I had to tell myself that there was no sign that anyone was in the building with me. My anxiety was probably just getting the best of me. I shrugged and took my seat, then spent the drive watching the slums and villas pass by outside my window.

Even in the slums, Christmas lights were strung up and lit for Dusshera. If I didn't focus too hard, the lights all looked connected. More often than not, the tent cities

were butted up against large apartment buildings or multi-family villas like the one we lived in. Children played in the streets all over. They used sticks and rocks to set up cricket games in empty dirt fields. Clothes hung from surrounding trees, and stick-thin women in dirty *saris* carried bricks or branches or large cloth bags on their heads.

It was a depressing sight even though I could hear the kids laughing over the honking cars. Maggie sat next to me in her designer shoes speaking on her smart phone, and I wondered what the driver went home to at night. It was night already, but I'd learned in my week there that Indians didn't retire to their homes until nine o'clock or later most of the time.

Those women with the loads on their heads were probably still at work. The car turned off of the main road just past a raised metro station. The commute was lighter than usual because most office workers in India had Dusshera off as a holiday. I noticed some people gathered in the deeper shadow of the train tracks, but people gathered in India all the time. Indians were a loquacious bunch, and they'd use anything as an excuse to share gossip.

We stopped in front of a building with two large marble pillars flanking the entrance. "Pirates of Grill" was written out in lights over an intricately carved door, and a man in a suit stood outside next to a podium to seat customers. The rest of the building was the usual ratty concrete everything was made out of, but they'd done something clever with the outdoor lights to put the focus on the carved door rather than the sad state of the building.

Natalie had been chatting with the driver on the way, so she'd made sure he'd be

back at the restaurant in two hours to pick us up. I still wasn't used to how much work it took to go anywhere. I had a used Beetle in Austin, and I'd taken for granted the freedom that came with being able to just get in my car and go. I'd also taken for granted the freedom of being able to wear shorts in ninety-nine degree weather. If one more person told me that it was finally getting cooler, I was going to strangle them.

Two seconds after getting out of the air-conditioned car there was a light film of sweat on my face. It was hot in Texas, but I didn't have a lot of occasion to sweat at night. A breeze picked up and tossed dust at us as we walked across the abbreviated parking lot. It didn't cool me off in the least, just gave the dust something to stick to.

Natalie closed her car door, and then had to immediately dive to the side to avoid two guys on motorcycles. They made no effort to avoid her, and she ended up splayed over the hood of the taxi. Neither guy stopped, and it was over in few seconds. I'd noticed lime green checkmarks on their helmets, but nothing else that would identify them. Nick and Maggie were already walking to the entrance and paying no attention to us lagging behind. She was already upright and dusting herself off by the time I rounded the car.

“Are you okay?”

She stared after the motorcycles for a long moment then smiled at me. “Yeah, I'm fine. I should have been paying better attention.” I had the distinct feeling she was lying to me, but I wasn't going to push it. She linked her arm through mine and we quickly caught up to the others.

She spoke to the host, and we were ushered into the building ahead of three Indian

couples waiting in the heat outside. It wasn't the first time that'd happened either. Being foreigners in India garnered us certain privileges, like never having to wait in line. I wished I'd known that at the airport when I first arrived.

The inside of the restaurant looked nothing like the outside. There was a buffet lining one half-glass wall that let us watch the chefs work large rotisserie ovens. We paused just inside the door while the host conferred with another man in a black suit. They weren't waiters because the waiters were all dressed as pirates in vests, poufy shirts, and trousers. The pirate theme was carried out everywhere else too. The decor was wood-heavy with framed pirate sayings in bad English. That was probably my favorite part of the whole place.

It smelled heavenly. I took a couple of deep breaths, but I couldn't figure out what it was beyond meat and spices. The host left us to follow the second guy in the suit who led us to a square corner table lit by the soft glow of fake candles and torches. There was a hole in the middle of the table that one of the waiters quickly filled with a coal grill.

The place was fantastically campy, and even Maggie was smiling by the time we picked up our menus. At odds with the theme, a karaoke machine and small dance floor were set up by the bar, as if the owners couldn't decide what would bring in more customers. We each occupied a side of the table, but I noticed Maggie had inched closer to Nick's corner. Nick, on the other hand, was leaned back as far as he could go in the chair.

I resolved to ignore them both in favor of the mouth-watering aromas coming

from the kitchen. Natalie told us that the waiters would bring by skewers of foods cooked in the big rotisserie grills in the kitchen as well as smaller skewers for our table grill. The skewers were always the same, so all we needed to decide were drinks and whether we wanted veg or non-veg.

Despite this explanation, Maggie insisted on quizzing the waiter when he arrived at our table. "Do you have any gluten-free foods?" He stared at her, confused, and asked in broken English if we wanted water.

I nodded, and Maggie slapped her menu down on the table. "What about organic foods?"

Natalie closed her eyes, and I swore she was counting under her breath. Whatever she did worked because she opened her eyes and calmly order two bottles of water and four non-veg grills.

The waiter smiled in gratitude and fled before Maggie could start in again, so she turned on Natalie. "Why did you dismiss him?"

"Maggie, you know as well as I do that restaurants here don't carry gluten-free or organic foods. Trust me, you'll like what they bring."

She huffed. "We'll see." I wasn't fooled. She kept sneaking glances at the steaming dishes on the buffet.

I couldn't take the smells anymore, so I stood and grabbed my plate. "I'm going in. When the waiter comes back, get me a Diet Coke, will you?"

Another chair scraped behind me as I started for the wall of food. I didn't care. I went straight for the *dal* and rice. Most of the foods on the buffet were Indian, but I also

found French fries and steamed veggies. I put a little bit of a lot of stuff on my plate and returned to the table munching on a fry.

Maggie's place was empty, but there was a Diet Coke waiting for me and several skewers on the grill. Nick and Natalie had their heads close together in a heated discussion. I wasn't sure I wanted to know, so I called out before I could overhear them.

"They have French fries, and I'm eating all the ones on my plate so get your own." They eased away from each other.

"Why would I want your fries when I can eat Nick's samosas," Natalie replied. She snatched a triangular fried puff off Nick's plate and took a big bite.

"That's right. All the ladies like my samosas." Nick grinned and caught the remainder of the samosa that Natalie threw at him.

Maggie set her full plate down and neatly placed her napkin over her lap. "We're in public. Do you think you two could behave as adults rather than the children I know you to be?"

I raised my eyebrows and took a long drink of my soda. That was the first time I'd heard her say anything even slightly negative about Nick. Maybe the honeymoon phase was wearing off.

"I'm sure Natalie started it, but Nick, you don't have to indulge her."

Nope, she was still firmly entrenched in the fantasy. The food was just as good as it smelled. We'd gotten fish, chicken, and masala veggies on the skewers, and Natalie insisted we all try some of each. Maggie ate everything on her plate and didn't make one complaint. It was a glorious half hour that I knew would never last.

About the time that Nick was finishing his fourth table skewer, I noticed the chefs walking around with large chunks of food on big mama skewers. I elbowed Natalie.

"What are they doing?"

She swallowed the mouthful of fish that I'd almost made her choke on. "They're the chefs, hence the white outfits and the funny hats."

"Yes. I'm familiar with the uniform habits of chefs. What are they doing walking around out here instead of making me tasty dishes?"

"They go table to table and shave off pieces of whatever they've cooked onto your plate." She raised her hand and waved one of the chefs over. He presented her with a giant metal rod stuck through several half chickens cooked to a delicious dark brown. She nodded, and he started cutting off chunks with a huge knife.

She nodded again when she had a small pile of meat on her plate, and he presented the remaining chickens to the rest of us. Nick waved him off, but the rest of us had some. It was spicy and smoky and full of flavor, and I wanted to live in that restaurant forever. There had to be a coat room or something where I could make a nest.

After Natalie's demonstration, we took turns beckoning the chefs over. It was all fun and games until I saw the pineapple guy. Maggie was in the middle of scolding me for speaking with my mouth full when he walked by the table next to us.

The sweet scent almost had me following him back into the kitchen. I kept watch for him while Nick and Natalie traded bad puns, and when he emerged, I shot my hand up and waved it around like I was having a seizure. The conversation got quiet around me.

He must have seen me because he headed our way. A big smile bloomed on his face as he approached our table. "Pineapple, madam?"

"Yes, please." I held my plate steady for him as he dropped slice after slice of dripping fruit onto it. He'd gone through three quarters of a pineapple when I stopped him. His smile deepened as he nodded at me and went looking for other patrons.

I looked up at my tablemates. All of them were staring at the large pile of steaming pineapple in front of me. Natalie was the first one to get her wits back.

"How do you have room for that?"

I hugged my plate closer to me. "There's always room for pineapple. And this isn't just any pineapple. It's rotisserie pineapple." I shoved a piece in my mouth and groaned in ecstasy. "With cinnamon and something else coated around it. It's official. This is my favorite food."

They watched as I ate the entire plate then looked around for the pineapple guy again. I couldn't find him, so I got comfy in my chair and prepared to wait.

"I need more pineapple."

Nick snickered.

Maggie took that as her cue to start complaining about the karaoke singer. In a bizarre sign from God, the lady finished butchering "I Will Always Love You" and stepped down to let a DJ start setting up his deck.

Natalie smiled and clapped her hands. "Awesome. I didn't know they'd have a DJ tonight. We have time to stay a while and listen."

Maggie groaned, but Nick smiled at me. "Looks like you'll get more pineapple

tonight after all."

"That's right. I wasn't leaving anyway."

Maggie tried to convince us to head home so she could get her beauty rest, but she was outvoted. Natalie wanted some music, I wanted to eat more pineapple, and Nick wanted to see how much pineapple I could put away after a full meal. He was in for a shock.

It didn't take long for the DJ to set up, and he played a good mix of Bollywood and American music. I was feeling flush after my second plate of pineapple, and Natalie was making me giggle with impressions of Mrs. Prasad. I hadn't thought about Nick's advances or my family or my art all night, which was impressive considering Nick was sitting next to me at the table. It helped that he spent most of the meal teasing me.

After a while, Maggie and Natalie joined in, but I didn't feel picked on. It was nice to feel included in a cohesive group rather than on one side of a battlefield. Nick kept circling back to my eating habits, probably because I kept eating while everyone else had tea.

"I can't believe you had a second pineapple. Do you have a tapeworm or something?" He made a show of reaching for my stomach to test his theory, and I slapped his hand away.

Natalie poked me from the other side. "I think she's part bear. She has to build up a layer of fat for all the sleeping she does."

I gasped in mock outrage. "You just called me fat."

She patted my hand. "You just ate two whole pineapples."

"It's not like they were plates of doughnuts. Fruit is good for you."

"Fruit is good for you in moderation." Maggie paused to sip her tea. "You know what they say..."

"Never pat a burning dog?"

"Don't eat the yellow snow?"

"Never marry a pretty girl?" We all turned to look at Nick. He shrugged. "I didn't say I agreed with it, just that people say it."

"Yeah, stupid people." Natalie tossed a leftover roll at him.

Maggie dabbed at the corners of her mouth before finishing. "You are what you eat."

Nick pushed his chair back suddenly and held his hand out to me. "Let's dance."

A slow song was just starting, and Nick was watching me with hooded eyes. It was one dance. It didn't mean I was agreeing to bear his children or anything. My fingers tingled when I put my hand in his, but I blamed it on too much sugar in my fruit.

The staff must have lowered the lights near the dance floor because it was much darker there than in the rest of the restaurant. Up to that point, the area had been full of groups of men showing off their best Bollywood moves. There were only three other couples on the floor by the time we stepped onto the wooden platform.

Nick pulled me close and wrapped an arm around my waist. I had a sense of déjà vu from earlier and a similar mix of excitement and foreboding. His usual scent was masked by the food, and I found myself disappointed. I was debating sniffing his neck when Nick interrupted my thoughts.

"Why don't you look directly at me?"

He surprised me enough to have me look up and meet his eyes. "I'm looking at you now."

"A second ago you were face to face with the kobold on my shirt."

I gave him my best dismissive look and forced myself not to focus back on the kobold. "I look at you all the time."

He chuckled. "Sure. When I'm naked or I've surprised you or you think I'm not looking."

"Don't think I didn't notice that you put naked first in there. Most people wouldn't even have to add that to the list."

"I'm not most people." His arm tightened, and I willingly moved closer. Intellectually, I thought a fling was a bad idea. Viscerally, I wanted to take his pants off with my teeth.

"Why don't you look at me, Sam?"

I couldn't look away. "I don't know. I don't know what to think of you. And your prettiness is distracting."

He smiled as we turned in a tight circle. "Men aren't pretty. We're handsome. Or studly, if you insist."

"Ok, Studly, why are you so focused on me?"

He leaned forward and whispered, "Maybe your prettiness is distracting."

I shivered and leaned away. "Very smooth. What's the real reason?"

"I like you. I get that most guys won't say that unless upfront unless they're

lying, but like I said, I'm not most guys. My sisters made sure of that. Natalie is my best friend, and she's been bragging about you forever. When she said you were coming for a visit, I thought, why not? And now that I know you, I want to help you see that the repressed wild child you're so afraid of is standing right here in front of me."

I couldn't speak for a second for fear that my voice would crack. He didn't push the moment, though he certainly could have. I usually didn't fall for suave lines, but he hit so close to what had been bothering me that it slid right past my defenses.

I shook off the tightening in my throat and met his eyes again. "That's very sweet, but I can handle my own self-image problems."

"If I say 'as you wish', would it be trite?"

"Yes. Now stop trying to charm me. It won't work. I have a charm-proof shield honed by years of my sister's debutante balls."

His brow wrinkled. "I thought only society princesses had debutante balls. And I thought they only had one as a coming out."

"What makes you think my sister wasn't a society princess? And she insisted that she attend the deb ball every year to show support for her sisters in white." I gave him an appraising look. "How do you know about deb society?"

"Isn't it common knowledge?"

I knew a deflection when I heard one. He didn't want to share his history with deb society. I debated pressing him on the subject, but I'd just spent a great deal of effort pushing him away from my issues. It seemed wrong to start preying on his.

The slow song came to an end, but another one started up immediately. Nick

didn't loosen his hold, so I stayed tight up against him. It wasn't a bad position to be in as long as I maintained some willpower. I was fully aware that I was sending mixed signals, but I couldn't seem to help myself. I wasn't in India to jump into a relationship, even if it did fall under the category of amazing experiences. It wasn't fair to either of us if we started something only to have it fizzle as soon as I went back to the States. The excuse sounded weak in my head, and I knew Natalie would tear it to pieces. I had three months in India, and I'd had entire relationships back home in that amount of time.

Nick's hand slid down my back to the top of my jeans and the resulting prickles of heat racing through me pulled me back out of my head. It was almost scary how easily he could excite me, and almost embarrassing how easily my mind wandered to a relationship with Nick every time I was around him. He'd never actually said he wanted a relationship. Maybe it was time to start asking those questions.

"Are you looking for a relationship or a vacation fling?"

His eyebrows shot up. "I don't really do vacation flings with roommates. It tends to be a bad idea."

His views echoed my own, but I noticed he didn't answer the question. I opened my mouth to respond, but he shook his head. "I'm not looking for a vacation fling, and we're already in a relationship. I want to see where our relationship would go if we stopped holding back."

"You're holding back?" Clearly, the filter between my brain and mouth was malfunctioning.

He laughed again. "Sort of. Despite my impressive courting skills," I snorted,

and he continued. "I'm mostly just following your lead. I appreciate a little back and forth, but I'm not going to try to move forward if there's a chance it'll scare you away further. And I don't care what Natalie said, I'm waiting for the green light from you directly."

I stopped moving and pulled away from him. "Back up. What did Natalie say?"

"She said that you asked her to take Maggie somewhere tonight after dinner so we could be alone. I think she was planning to have the driver drop them off at a club on the way home."

My mouth dropped open. "What?"

He put his hands on my shoulders. "It's okay. I wasn't taking it seriously. I'm familiar enough with Natalie's sense of humor that I wasn't taking any chances."

I was familiar with Natalie's sense of humor too, but I didn't think she meant it as a joke. My fists clenched as I pulled away from Nick as second time. "Excuse me."

I couldn't meet his eyes as I fled from the dance floor. The bathrooms were in the opposite direction from our table, but Natalie must have been watching because I heard her call my name as I wound my way through the tables.

I was having trouble catching my breath as I reached the alcove holding the restrooms, and I was thankful there was no one else in the room. I wet a paper towel and pressed it to my forehead. Only a moment later, Natalie pushed through the door after me.

I turned on her. "What are you doing? This is not a date."

"It is now, young Padawan."

I threw my paper towel into the trash. "I am so tired of people trying to manipulate me."

"I'm not trying to manipulate you," she paused for a second. "Okay, maybe a little, but I just wanted to give you a friendly shove in the right direction since I got in the way earlier."

"I am perfectly capable of making my own decisions even with you interrupting. I don't need shoves, friendly or otherwise. If I want to get involved with Nick, then I will. If I want to hitchhike across India, then I will. If I want nothing but that rotisserie pineapple for dinner, then by god, that's all I'm going to have. I am an adult. I need you to treat me like one."

"Yeah Sam, but you haven't made any decisions, have you? You talk a good game about taking chances and experiencing life outside your bubble, but you got stuck somewhere between Austin and here. That's where the shove comes in."

I was reaching the height of my frustration. "From now on, leave me alone."

Natalie hung her head. "I'm sorry, Sam. I was just trying to help. I want you to be happy."

"Hooking me up with a potential boy toy is not going to help and it's not going to make me happy."

She smiled sheepishly and held her finger and thumb an inch apart. "A smidge happy?"

I refused to let her soften me up. "Fine. Yes. Maybe a little happy with Nick, but it would be fleeting. Just like the pineapple. Just like India. And that's not even

factoring in the heavy date rape undertones."

She waved my concerns away. "Nick would never do that."

It was worse that she wasn't taking me seriously, even then. "I don't care what Nick would do. I value your friendship, but I can't be around you right now."

"Sam—" She grabbed my arm, but I shook her off and hurried out of the room. Why did everyone assume it was okay to grab me?

Nick was seated at the table again. Maggie was smiling at him, but he was watching for me. I met his eyes, turned, and walked out of the restaurant. Natalie's brow-beating before we'd left for dinner assured that I hadn't had time to grab a purse. I'd stuffed my money, ID, and keys into my jeans, so I could get home as long as I could remember the way.

I pushed through the carved door to find the front of the restaurant empty. The host must have been seating someone because he wasn't at his post and no one was waiting. Steps beyond the entrance, the path was swallowed in shadows. My goosebumps returned. I knew the road was straight ahead, and the metro station was just beyond that, but I couldn't see past the dark trees surrounding the yard.

It was still a holiday, so I was surprised there weren't people lighting fireworks and making merry all over. I could hear the booms from other areas close by, but there weren't even any cars on the road. I squared my shoulders. A little darkness was nothing compared to returning inside to face my humiliation.

I stepped away from the lights and made my way across the street. My eyes adjusted quickly enough, but all I saw was an empty street with a raised, dimly lit metro

station a block down. A pig screeched in the trees to my right, and I jumped.

Relief had me giggling. I imagined it was one of those chocolate pigs from my dreams and wished I'd had some chocolate sauce to dip my pineapple in during dinner. There were no cars coming, so I jogged across the street to the station stairs.

I noticed the two men and the parked car as I neared the pedestrian stairs entrance. They were parked in the darkest shadows under the train line and leaning against the car. Behind the car, I could just make out two more people wearing motorcycle helmets, even though it was full dark and they weren't on motorcycles. They looked like the guys who had almost run down Natalie earlier, right down to the bright green check marks on their helmets which were now glowing in the dark. Unease skittered down my back, but I held my head up and kept a steady pace toward the stairs.

I snuck peeks at the group as I walked. The guys leaning against the car turned like the motorcycle guys were saying something to them then straightened. Their clothes were dirty like construction workers, or like they slept on the side of the street. Both were slight, but that was all I could tell about their features without looking directly at them. A glass bottle gleamed in the light as one passed it to the other, and I increased my speed to a quick walk.

I had to pass within a couple of feet of them to get to the stairs. There was no reason to assume anything bad was going to happen just because I watched a lot of crime shows. I glanced at the men, and my heart started pounding as the one without the bottle pushed away from the car toward me. His smell wafted ahead of him, and I wished I'd remembered my standing rule to breathe through my mouth while outside.

*{ a beautiful way to live }*

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10

He stepped between me and the stairs, forcing me to stop or try to rush past him. I judged him to have a couple of inches and a good thirty pounds on me. I stopped.

"Hello preety. Are you liking sex?"

I tried to hold on to my righteous anger at Natalie, but it was draining away to be replaced by fear. I wasn't sure what to say to convince him to leave me alone. His smile wobbled as he took a step toward me and I scrambled back.

"Preety girl liking sex, isn't it?"

My hands were shaking, and I couldn't figure out what to do with them. "No. Move, please." My mother would be proud. I was about to be assaulted, and I was being polite to the assaulter.

His face stayed mostly in the shadows, so it was hard to anticipate his intentions. I didn't have anything I could use as a weapon, so I hoped that the extent of his plan was to scare me with poorly phrased solicitations. I took a careful step back, and he followed

my movement.

He didn't seem to be in a hurry to approach me. His friends stayed put by the car, but I wasn't naïve enough to believe that made me any safer. I heard honking somewhere close by and glanced around for headlights. During my slow retreat, I had stepped off the curb, and I didn't want to escape this guy and his silent friends by getting hit by a bus.

My breath came in quick gasps as my gaze tracked back and forth between the guy stalking me, his friends at the car, and the street. A light flickered in my peripheral vision, and I turned my head toward it.

Before I could turn back, he lunged at me. The guy must have seen the light too and thought he was going to be interrupted. I hunched my shoulders and tried to backpedal out of his reach, but he was quicker than I'd expected. His hand curled around the material of my sleeve and jerked me forward.

I tripped over the curb I'd been so careful with before and slammed into him.

"Get off!" I flailed and pushed, but he got a good grip on my hair and pulled my head back. My body arched toward him, and he wrapped an arm around my waist to keep me in place. He hissed out a breath as I tried to wriggle free.

Tears streamed down my cheeks, and my head throbbed where he was pulling my hair. The arm around my waist tightened, and he lifted me off my feet. He started dragging me back to his friends, who were laughing. I could smell liquor on his breath, and there was no way I was letting him get me close enough to stuff me in that car. I shrieked and tried to kick him in the shins. The first two shots glanced off his jeans. The third connected with his knee, but he didn't drop me.

I couldn't get any leverage, so I let my body go limp. He grunted and stumbled at the unexpected weight, and my feet hit the ground. I gritted my teeth against the pain of his hand fisted in my hair and pushed away from his chest. He tried to pull me back against him, so I went with the motion and kneed him in the balls.

He dropped me and bent over at the waist. It must not have been a direct hit because he straightened up right away. He started toward me again, and as he stepped into one of the puddles of light, I saw that his smile had faded into a scowl.

I turned to run and the headlights of a car blinded me as it raced down the street. Before the car came to a complete stop, my attacker stumbled around and ran for the shadows under the station where his friends had been. My hand came up to block the glare as the car squealed to a stop between me and the assailants. I caught a glimpse of the taxi driver from earlier as he jumped out of the car and chased after the guy.

The motorcycles revved and sped away, followed shortly by the car. I tried to look past the taxi, but I couldn't see anything in the shadows anymore. The low rumble of the taxi became very loud in the sudden silence. The darkness around me looked sinister, and I couldn't stop shivering despite the heat of the evening. Where was the taxi driver?

Someone tapped me on the shoulder and I yelped. A young Indian woman about my age was clutching her purse and glaring toward the train station. People were coming out of the trees and gathering behind her.

She said something to me in Hindi, so I shrugged and shook my head. I couldn't get the feel of the guy off my skin, and all I could think about was going home and

spending the night in the shower. Tears were still dripping down my face, and the woman surprised me by offering me a couple of paper napkins.

"This will help."

I wiped my face and blew my nose. The men in the group passed us as they headed in the same direction as the taxi driver. "Thank you. Where is everyone going?"

She patted my back as I sniffled. "They make sure the men are gone. Is not right for them to touch you unasked. But is dangerous for women alone." Her scolding was gentle, but she got her point across.

I wanted to argue that I shouldn't have to have an escort to walk to the train station, but my head felt heavy and the left part of my scalp was sore. The woman must have understood because she patted my back one more time and joined the group chattering behind me.

The taxi driver came back at the same time that Natalie found me standing in the street. I must have been splotchy from crying, and there were probably rivulets of makeup streaming down my cheeks. My arms were wrapped around my waist, and I noticed my sleeve was torn where the guy had grabbed me. I was still shivering, but inside I was going strangely numb. I was never going to wear those clothes again anyway, so why should I care that the top was ruined?

She stopped short when she got a good look at me. "Oh my god. Are you okay? What happened? How did you get in trouble in the five minutes you were out of my sight?" Her voice was getting higher as she went on, and I cringed at the last question.

"Sam." Nick stepped past her and reached for me, but I flinched away. I couldn't

help it. He nodded and put his hands in his pockets.

I opened my mouth to tell them I was fine. That they shouldn't worry. That we should just forget it and go home, but the words wouldn't come. A couple more tears leaked out and I sniffled again. "I'm not okay."

Natalie broke out of her stupor and threw her arms around me before I could dodge. My reaction time was even slower than it had been earlier. "Sam, what happened?" She squeezed, then pulled back to look at my face again.

"I--" I stared blankly at the strangers behind her. What was I supposed to tell her? I'd been stupid? I was easy bait? Maggie jumped into my silence.

"Some street person grabbed her by the metro station." Her expression dismissed my attack, and anger started a slow burn again in my stomach.

"How do you even know what happened?"

She pointed at the group behind us. "They were talking about it as we walked up. What? I didn't know it was you until just now."

I decided she wasn't worth talking to and focused on Natalie. "He tried to take me to a car where his friend was waiting." I glanced down at my torn shirt, and Natalie followed my gaze.

She gasped and touched the torn cotton. "What do you mean he tried to take you? He didn't just cop a feel and run away?"

I focused on her face again. "Why do you make it sound like that's okay?"

"It happens a lot here. Guys think it's their right to grope any girl they want. People tend to blame the women, especially if they're out alone." She hesitated a moment

and glanced at the strangers gathering around us. "On the other hand, most guys are eager to jump in and protect the womenfolk if they see something hinky going on."

A niggling worry surfaced in my foggy brain. "Shouldn't we call the police?"

Natalie shook her head. "It wouldn't do any good. They tend to believe what's most convenient and what will cause them the least amount of work. They'll just say you imagined it."

"What about the taxi driver? He saw what was happening."

Maggie piped up. "Didn't you hear her? It wouldn't matter. You're better off just going home. More importantly, I have plans in an hour."

With Maggie's concerns firmly focused back on herself, she walked around the taxi and climbed in. I tried to follow, but tripped on the uneven sidewalk right in front of me and nearly fell on my face. I'd never been physically attacked before, and I was falling apart once I was no longer in immediate danger.

The taxi driver apologized for not helping more and opened the door for us. Natalie kept an arm around me, and Nick frowned at the darkness around us as I got in the car. Maggie was the only one who went back to normal. She pulled her phone out and started texting.

I told them I didn't want to discuss it any more in the taxi, so the ride home was silent except for the clicks from Maggie's phone and the honking of the other cars around us. I felt better once we were surrounded by cars again. I never thought I'd feel that way about Delhi traffic, but the press of fellow travelers on all sides made me feel insulated.

My mind, sick as it was, kept replaying the moment when the guy had grabbed

my hair and pressed me against him. I had no doubts about what his intentions were once he got me in the car, and it made me nauseous to think the only thing standing between me and that fate was the taxi driver's excellent timing.

Natalie's question tugged at me. Why hadn't he just groped me? I knew part of the blame fell on me. Dark streets were not my thing, so why had I thought it was okay to go gallivanting off on my own. I'd been warned by everyone not to go out alone at night, but the warnings hadn't felt real. I'd had trouble believing that a major city in India was any more dangerous than a major city in America.

At every turn, I made the wrong choice. I'd wandered off on my own. I'd chosen to stand my ground instead of running when I felt uneasy. I'd let him take advantage of me. I was so worried about taking a chance on a relationship with Nick that I wandered into a truly dangerous situation blindly. What was wrong with me? The drive home was quick, and I didn't see anything besides my reflection in the window. I was crying again when we pulled up to our gate.

Natalie paid the driver, and we all trudged silently up the walk. Maggie bumped me aside as we got to the door. I didn't have the energy for a battle of wills with her over something as stupid as who got to go into the apartment first. The screen slammed behind Nick and Natalie as they came in after us. Maggie didn't even try to get Nick's attention as she crossed the living room to his door.

"Maggie, don't you have plans?" Nick's words stopped her before she could turn the knob.

She dropped her hand and turned. I expected her to argue, but after a long look at

his face, she nodded. "I'll see you on Monday." The door closed quietly behind her as she left us alone in the apartment.

I rubbed my hands over my face, and Nick's shoulders twitched like it was hard for him to hold his position. Natalie's speech about his white knight tendencies came back to me, but there wasn't enough space in my head to share Nick's emotional turmoil as well as my looming fear.

He met my eyes, and he reached out like he was going to touch my face. I flinched and moved back out of his reach. I really wished I would stop shaking long enough to calm down. "Sam, it wasn't your fault. You know that right?"

Natalie glared at him. "Of course it wasn't her fault, even if she did go against all our advice."

I ignored her to focus on Nick. "Does it matter?"

His shoulders twitched again, and his hands strained against his pockets. "Yeah, it matters. I shouldn't have let you walk out on your own, so if we're assigning blame I get some too. And Natalie gets some for setting you off. And Maggie gets some for distracting me when I got up to go after you. It's killing me that you won't let me touch you."

Natalie jumped between us and forced me to look at her instead of Nick. "Will you please tell us what happened? All of it?"

I was still standing behind the couch, which was as far as I'd made it into the apartment before Maggie had left. My mouth opened, but I couldn't make myself speak about it. Fear closed my throat, and I shook my head.

I wasn't ready to talk about it yet. I needed a shower, my froggy pajamas, and about a gallon of Natalie's hot chocolate. They didn't stop me as I went into the bedroom. Nick hadn't reached for me again after I'd flinched away from him. I felt guilty for that, but I couldn't handle him touching me when I still felt dirty.

I undressed and left my clothes in a heap near the door. The scarf Natalie had given me what seemed like days ago was on top of the pile, and I felt a pang of sadness for a gift that I'd never be able to wear again. Natalie must have left the switch for the hot water heater on again because I didn't have to wait for the bathroom to steam up. I knew I'd only have about twenty minutes of hot water, but I planned to use every minute of that time scrubbing myself. Then I was throwing away my loofah and buying a new, untainted one.

I cried in the shower. There was no one to see me, and the adrenaline was crashing out of my system. I kept jumping back and forth between shame, anger, and relief. They all wanted a chance to lash out, but the only handy target was myself. I felt like my poor little bamboo plant. I was technically alive and healthy, but it felt like a part of me had died.

I'd seen enough *Law and Order* to know that a sexual assault was never the victim's fault, but I kept seeing that dark road and feeling my skin tighten with apprehension. I'd known it was dangerous, and I'd blindly wandered in anyway. How could I not take some blame for that?

After the shower, I dropped into bed with my hair still wet. I lifted my arm to look at my watch and groaned at the twinge in my shoulder. I'd probably have bruises

too. The glowing dial showed it was only 10:48. There was no energy left in me, and I had the absurd hope that I'd wake up in my bed in Austin the next morning. I closed my eyes and felt a pang of regret that I'd have missed out on getting to know Natalie again, haggling over flowers from the vendor on the corner, tutoring Abishek, eating *dal*, kissing Nick. A heartbeat passed. I'd especially regret not kissing Nick. A little ball of warmth flared to life in my belly at all those memories, and I finally stopped shaking before I fell asleep.

Morning came far too quickly for my liking. I'd spent the night having dreams about being kidnapped by pigs and forced to eat pineapple for their amusement. I was ridiculously grateful that my mind had spared me the trauma of reliving the attack over and over again all night. The light coming through the window was still grey, which meant I'd gotten up earlier than usual.

Natalie was snoring into her pillow on the other side of the room, so I gathered my clothes quietly and got dressed in the bathroom. I'd been right. I had big bruises on my upper arm and waist where the guy had grabbed me. I rotated my shoulder, but it didn't hurt as much as it had the night before. Once I put my clothes on, I couldn't even tell that I'd been injured.

The attack had overshadowed Natalie's machinations, but it hadn't made me forget them entirely. My anger seemed stupid now. If I was completely honest, my mixed signals with Nick seemed stupid too. I shook my head. Apparently, I really did live in a bubble if I was considered a budding relationship with someone I liked a dangerous situation.

I was ready a full hour early, and I considered my options. The school wasn't open on Saturdays, and I'd already explored the empty campus enough for one lifetime. I could head for the closest Café Coffee Day for breakfast; it was only a couple of blocks from the apartment. My sketch pad caught my eye on the desk, and I realized I really wanted to go somewhere new. I wanted to get some new sketches of life. People living and being happy in a dangerous world.

Abishek had told me that the Mughal Garden was open again for the public to tour. He'd said not to go this weekend because it would be packed with families due to Dusshera, but it sounded perfect to me. I looked up the location on my laptop and found it only a short metro ride away. The thought of the walk to the metro station had my heart pounding, so I forced myself to stop and leave a note telling the others where I was heading just in case. I grabbed my bag and left the apartment before I lost my nerve. I wasn't going to let fear control me. It was a bright day outside, and I made sure there was a crowd of people around me at all times.

Every time I was jostled, I had to take yoga breaths in order not to panic. I wanted them near me, but not touching me. The flower seller we passed every day called out to me, and I nearly knocked a woman into traffic jumping away. A cloud of her perfume gagged me as I tried to yoga breathe, and I figured it was her form of protective camouflage. If no one could get close enough to touch her without hacking up a lung, she was safe from fellow pedestrians. She fell behind me as I hurried up the stairs and into the metro station.

I didn't breathe normally again until I was in the women's car and the train was

moving. It was my first encounter with real holiday traffic, and the car was packed. I stood in the middle of the herd, well away from the window of perverts, and held onto a pole for dear life. As safe as I felt in the crowd, I missed my morning gossip fests with Natalie.

About half of the women got off at my stop. I was glad the gardens were just across from the station because I wasn't sure I could deal with much more humanity. I was jumpy and scared, and the logical part of me was frantically trying to wrest control from my animal instincts. I'd never really felt that people around me were dangerous before, and I was pissed that one guy had changed my entire outlook.

I was even more pissed that the feel and smell of him was overshadowing the other events of the evening. Up until Nick's revelation, I'd been having a great time. Even during the attack, I'd managed to fight back, something I'd always assumed I'd do if thrown into such a situation. The taxi driver had performed some fancy driving to help me, despite not knowing anything about the situation. Then there were the random strangers who'd gathered around and offered a measure of protection. I didn't want my beliefs in humanity to be defined by one asshole when there were so many other examples of good people.

A large arch marked the entrance to the Mughal Garden. I had to go through a metal detector and a pat down before being allowed inside, but it was all very impersonal and over quickly. The gardens themselves stretched out in a sea of colors. I hadn't expected much to be blooming because of the heat, but the plants looked lush. The gardeners must spend a fortune in watering this place.

I went left and walked down a series of steps and landings covered in grass leading to a large fountain. Immaculate white tile marked the edges of the path and surrounded the fountain itself. Red and yellow tulips waved back and forth in their neat beds throughout the area. I got closer and saw that the inside of the fountain shimmered blue like a swimming pool. The water misted over me and I smiled. It was cool and caught the sun as it settled on my skin. I wanted to lay there in the grass and let the water droplets fall on me all day.

Directly in front of me, in the distance, I could see a large building with a dome in the middle. Over the greenery, I could see the spray from other fountains throughout the garden. I'd bet that helped with the watering. Families laughed and smiled as they walked past me in all directions. It was still fairly early, so the heat of day hadn't really hit yet. I wasn't even sweating, but I could see how these fountains would be popular around lunchtime. Sweetly scented air blew across my face, and I decided to follow the wind.

A curving path took me away from the fountains and into an area with trees and benches set among bright flowers in geometric beds. I chose an empty bench at random and stretched out in the shade. A little girl, maybe four years old, skipped around the grass while her family sat under a nearby tree. No one looked concerned that she was moving further away, and all the people she skipped past smiled and touched her cheek. A woman picked her up, said something to her in Hindi, gave her a smacking kiss on the cheek, then put her down and continued on her way. I couldn't imagine letting a stranger pick up and kiss my child without caring.

In America, children are to be protected from strangers as if everyone posed a potential threat. I'd considered going home last night, but in the daylight, among all this beauty, it seemed like a coward's choice. I wasn't a coward, and I felt like there was a lot more here to cherish than to fear.

The little girl picked a yellow flower and danced in a circle with it. I pulled out my sketch pad and started drawing. The little girl. Her family. The flowers. The topiary shaped like Buddha. The arched gazebo in the distance. Smile after smile after smile on the people around me. My stomach growled after a while and I put my pencils down. The family was still there under the tree, passing food back and forth. I missed Nick and Natalie with a sudden pang. I wanted to share this moment with them. The sun had moved the shade away from my bench, and I was starting to sweat. I checked my watch and was surprised to see it was almost eleven. I'd been at the garden for hours.

I stretched, and a shadow fell over me. A sliver of fear wormed its way through my happiness until Nick sat down next to me. I was relieved that it was Nick, but clearly I was still not back to normal.

I leaned back and sighed. I should have known that wishing for him would make him appear. "How did you find me? And where's Natalie?"

He sat next to me, leaving a big enough gap that we weren't touching. "Natalie is pacing at home. And you left a note."

"So I did. How did you find me in this rather large garden?"

"I followed you." He didn't even bother to look embarrassed. "After last night, I thought it might be better if you weren't traveling around Delhi on your own."

“I’m not a child, Nick. I can take care of myself.”

He stretched his arm across the back of the bench and touched my hair. I refused to flinch this time. “Believe me, I know that. Maybe it was more for me than for you. I was just going to watch, but you looked so lonely.”

“That’s what all the stalkers say.”

He laughed. “So what did you decide?”

“What?”

“Your note said you had to think. I figured that meant you were deciding to stay or go.”

“I see you’re a stalker and a mind-reader.”

He shrugged. I fiddled with my pencil and reminded myself that I wasn’t a coward.

“Do you want me to stay?”

He tugged at my hair. “I just spent the entire morning following you to convince myself that you were safe. I’d say that’s a pretty definitive yes. I have no idea when you became important to me, but there it is. I was scared to death last night that something had happened to you.”

I tried to slap his hand away. “Something *did* happen to me.”

He flipped his hand and captured mine, then laced our fingers together. “I know. I meant something more permanent.”

I was quiet while I let that resonate. Nick kept a gentle grip on my hand, and I watched the family finish eating. The little girl had finally worn herself out. She was

passed out next to the mom, face down in the grass.

“What’s wrong with us, Nick? You felt the need to follow me in order to keep me safe. I push people away so I don’t have to take a chance that I’ll get hurt. Look at them.” I pointed out the little girl and her family. “They’re not afraid at all. They don’t see strangers as dangerous. They’re completely open and trusting. What a beautiful way to live.” Nick released my hand to put his arm around me and pull me close. I tensed up for a second, then relaxed and laid my head on his shoulder. I wanted to live beautifully.

We stayed that way until the family started to pack up. They’d opened my eyes a bit, and I couldn’t let them leave without giving them something in return. Nick’s arm dropped away as I stood up. The sketch I’d done of the little girl with her flower was at the top of my stack. I wasn’t sure how to explain what I was doing, so I just walked over to the family and crouched down next to the mom. She looked much younger up close. I smiled and handed her the sketch.

It took a moment for her to realize what she was looking at, but once she did, she said something to the man with her and showed him the paper. He grinned at me and said something in Hindi. I blushed and shrugged. They must have got that I didn’t understand because she patted my hand and carefully put the sketch in her backpack. They tried to get me to sit with them, but I could feel Nick watching from the bench. My knee popped as I got to my feet, and I winced. I kept finding surprise spots that hurt from the attack. I waved at the family as I hobbled back to Nick.

He stood and waited for me. “You never did tell me what you decided.”

I packed up my supplies and slung my bag over my shoulder before answering

him. “Nothing is going to get me to leave before my three months are up.” He grinned as I reached for his hand again. “Let’s go home.”

We took our time walking out of the garden, and I let the warm contentment build inside me until it blocked out any lingering fear. A picture began to form in my mind of the fountain and the little girl with the flower. I wanted to capture her joy, and I knew what I was going to paint when I got back to my easel. I still had to talk to Natalie about what had happened, but for the moment, life was beautiful, and I was going to paint it.

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*{ kung-fu justice }*

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*11*

Nick and I returned to an empty apartment. My note was crossed out and Natalie had scribbled that she went to the store. As much as I wanted to explore my new resolve to let Nick touch me, the image in my head called to me. I kissed his cheek and told him I'd be busy for a while. I may have shut the bedroom door in his face, but I was already focused on the colors I wanted to mix.

I didn't remember much about the next twenty-four hours, but that was how I worked. I finished the painting in the wee hours of the morning and crashed out on the bed. When I woke up Sunday afternoon, I had dried paint caked all over me, and I was alone in the room. I decided I should touch up the painting before I showered, and that's how Natalie found me. Wearing my painting clothes from the day before, covered in smears of color, and muttering at the canvas. I didn't blame her for taking drastic measures.

“Anyone is capable of kicking someone in the junk. It's not like you need kung-

fu skills for that.” It was Sunday night, and Natalie had finally lured me away from my canvas with the promise of the emergency cookie stash. She even went one step further and baked the cookies, so the smell of warm chocolate was wafting through the apartment.

Natalie came in from the kitchen with the latest batch and joined Nick and me on the couch. There was no way she’d missed me snuggled against Nick’s side, but she’d wisely chosen to stay silent on the matter, for the moment anyway. “I’m not going to argue that. Junk-kicking is a well-known deterrent to attack. I just want to know more details than *he grabbed me, I kicked him, the end.*”

I stuffed a cookie in my mouth and leaned my head back against Nick’s shoulder. He took that as a sign that he should answer for me, since I refused to talk with my mouth full. “Are the details really important?”

“Yes!” Natalie threw her hands in the air, and I suspected she was trying not to throttle both of us. She was starting to get the crazy-eyed look that I usually associated with Maggie. “Please just tell me. It’s not healthy to keep it inside.”

I swallowed and faced the fact that I should probably talk about it, even if I didn’t want to relive it. “Fine.” I moved away from Nick’s warmth and leaned forward to stare at the cookie plate. “I’ll tell you once. No interrupting. Save your questions for the end.”

I took the silence behind me as agreement. “There were four guys around a car parked under the metro.”

“*Four* guys?”

I turned to glare at Natalie and she covered her mouth with her hand.

“Four guys. Two were dirty and drunk. Two had on dark clothes and motorcycle helmets. The motorcycle guys said something to the drunk guys, and one of them approached me asking for sex. When I said no, he grabbed me.” I had to stop there and take a deep breath. My back was so tense it was cramping. They let me have my moment, and I was glad neither of them tried to comfort me. “He got a grip on my hair and tried to drag me toward the car. I went limp, then kicked him. He let go, I backed away, and the taxi pulled up between us. You know the rest.”

I broke a cookie into crumbs while I waited for the questions to start. Natalie didn't disappoint.

“There were four guys and only one of them came at you?”

“Yes.”

“What were the other guys doing?”

“I don't know. I was a little distracted by the one getting a hard on while he tried to drag me away.” That must have been as much as Nick could handle because he wrapped an arm around my waist and settled me next to him again. I tried to relax, but my body wouldn't obey. Nick didn't seem to mind, and I was glad.

My back was against Nick's chest, and Natalie scooted closer to sandwich me in. “I'm sorry, Sam. I'm so sorry that happened to you, but this is important. Can you describe the other guys?”

“The one with the bottle looked like he might work construction. They were both pretty dusty. He had a mustache. The other two...no. They were wearing motorcycle

helmets when I saw them.” An image of the guys saying something to my attacker popped up in my head and I remembered seeing the helmet markings before. “Actually, I think they might be the same guys who almost ran you over when we were getting out of the taxi.”

Natalie leaned forward to stare into my face. “Are you sure? Can you describe the helmets?”

“They were black with green checkmarks. I thought they were just neon green at first, but they glowed in the darkness under the metro. I haven’t seen anyone else with glow-in-the-dark helmets.”

Natalie blew out a breath and collapsed against the back of the couch. “I knew it. I knew those little jackholes were causing problems.”

Nick spoke around me in a very even tone. “Are you saying you know who attacked Sam?” I gripped his wrist while Natalie hesitated. She wouldn’t look directly at us, and I was worried for a second that she would lie about this.

“Yeah. I thought it was weird that the guy tried to drag her away in the first place. And in a four on one situation, they don’t usually send one guy to do all the dirty work. I know who owns those helmets, and I’m pretty sure they put the drunk guys up to it. They’ve been sort of stalking me for a couple of weeks, but it never occurred to me they’d come after you.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that, but Nick didn’t have my reticence. “A couple of weeks? When were you going to tell me? Have they approached you? Why haven’t you called the police?”

Natalie sank further into the cushions. “I wasn’t going to tell you. I wanted to handle it on my own.” She opened her eyes and rolled her head toward us. “They just follow me around and act all creepy. The police don’t care because they’re not doing anything illegal.”

Natalie offered Nick a few more platitudes, but I was remembering all the times in the lab when I’d look over and see those two boys watching Natalie while she worked. I remembered the intensity of their stares and the creepy smiles they shared with each other. I remembered them watching me and Abishek head for the empty building on the day it rained.

“It was the kids from the lab.”

Natalie stopped talking and her mouth hung open a moment before she snapped it shut. Her reaction was enough confirmation for me. Nick shifted so he could see my face. “What boys?”

“These two seniors who hang around the lab every day. As far as I can tell, they don’t do any work, just lounge around slacking off and harassing the girls.” Something else came back to me. “Abishek said they were harassing Shulpa before she disappeared.”

Natalie closed her eyes again and I knew I’d finally dug up part of her secret. “I thought if I kept it quiet you wouldn’t get involved. Then I thought if I kept you busy enough you wouldn’t have time to find trouble.”

“I wasn’t looking for trouble, Natalie. I was looking to help a friend. Abishek was really worried about her.” Natalie winced, and I groaned. “You know where she is,

don't you?"

"I'm the one who helped her hide."

Nick excused himself and went into the kitchen. Cabinet doors slammed and dishes clanked together as he exercised some of his frustration. It was reassuring that he wasn't the yelling type because I tended to just freeze up when someone yelled at me.

"You need to tell us everything, Natalie. Clearly, ignorance is no way to keep someone safe." I patted her hand and she opened her eyes.

"I was doing the right thing. It was just really bad timing. Neeraj and Sanat, the motorcycle punks, came after Shulpa in the science building. I don't know what their intentions were, but things got out of hand. Shulpa found me after. She was crying, her clothes were torn, but she didn't want me to do anything about it. I convinced her we should call the police, and she agreed, but only if I helped her go somewhere far away. Mrs. Prasad's husband owns a farm near Lucknow, and she agreed to hire Shulpa to work for them."

"Mrs. Prasad knew about all this?"

"Yeah, and she wouldn't let me tell her family where she went. The police were suspicious when I reported a rape without having a victim to back it up. Neeraj and Sanat claimed that Shulpa stole some gold jewelry from them, and this was her way of trying to cover it up. Shulpa's family wouldn't get involved and the boys' families backed them up by throwing money at the situation. Now Shulpa is wanted for theft and the police refuse to listen to me about the rape. They're convinced I know where she went, and they're right, but I'm not going to tell them."

Nick came back into the room with two steaming cups of hot cocoa and took his seat again. I took one of the cups, and he put the other in front of Natalie. “Did you catch all that?”

“Oh yeah. Natalie’s got two rapists in her lab, she’s in trouble with the police, and her silence put you in danger.”

She reached for a cup and wrapped her hands around it. “I said I was sorry, Nick. On the bright side, now that Sam’s been attacked, we can finally get the police to listen to us.”

“Why didn’t you tell me, Nat? I would have helped you.”

“Because I thought I could handle it on my own, without any one else getting hurt.”

I stopped them before we could take another turn around the guilt carousel. “Fine. We all made bad decisions. I understand why Shulpa wouldn’t want to talk about it, but we need to call the police if you think they’ll listen to me. I’m not sure how much good it’ll do since neither of the boys was the one who attacked me, but they were definitely involved.”

Nick didn’t look convinced, but he didn’t leave my side either. I sipped my cocoa as Natalie called the detectives from Shulpa’s case. We had the name and number of the taxi driver to back up our claim if we needed it, but I was still exceedingly nervous while we waited for them to arrive. Natalie tried to disappear in the couch cushions while Nick lectured her about trust and friendship, and my mind kept returning to Shulpa.

Something terrible had happened to her, and instead of reporting it, she’d wanted

to hide. Before Friday night, I wouldn't have understood her reaction, but I'd been in her shoes to some degree, and I did understand. Talking about it made it real, and it was so much easier to just pretend it was a bad dream. Shulpa didn't have that option; she couldn't go home and hide under her covers. Abishek had said her parents wouldn't accept her home if she was shamed, and enough time had passed that whether or not anything had happened, she would be burdened with that stigma. The farm offered her a place to be safely hidden, though without schooling or a family to support her, she would never move beyond it. And maybe worst of all was the weight of blame I knew she felt. She would believe it was her fault. I hurt for her, and I wished there was some way for me to make it okay.

I didn't fool myself into thinking that talking to the police would make Shulpa's life any easier, but I was angry that two teenagers on the verge of adulthood thought it was okay to act like that. I was beyond angry that they'd forced me to see the world as a dangerous place. I may have been afraid of risk, but I'd never felt like I was truly in danger before. The risk was always hypothetical so that I could more easily avoid it. I wanted those guys to pay. Vengeance was probably a less healthy motivation than justice, but if I was going to brave a confrontation then I was going to be honest about my reasons for it.

A knock at the screen broke me out of my musing, and I was surprised to see Natalie open the door for the two suited gentlemen she'd been talking to at the market. That was one more question answered. They spoke surprisingly good English, and while they kept giving Natalie suspicious looks, they seemed to take me seriously. I tried to tell

my story without breaking down, but I couldn't stop a couple of tears from falling. Nick rubbed my back but didn't interrupt.

Natalie interrupted a couple of times. When I was done talking, she took over. "I recognized the two boys on the motorcycles as Neeraj and Sanat. They've been following me around just like I told you, and Sam said it was the same boys who were with the man who attacked her. He was trying to drag her to them. You have to—"

"Madam, we will investigate this information and take action." They didn't say much else, but they took the taxi driver's information and a sketch they asked me to do of my attackers before they left.

There didn't seem much else to do but finish off the cookies and speculate about the Indian justice system. It took Natalie ten and a half cookies before she was calm enough to focus on how close Nick and I were sitting. I counted.

Nick has his arm around my waist again, as if he were afraid I'd change my mind if he let go, and I was leaning against his shoulder. She stopped shoveling cookies in mid-bite. "You should probably call your mom and tell her to stop planning your wedding to the son of that nice lawyer that lives down the way."

Nick inhaled some cookie, and we all waited while I coughed it back up out of his lungs. "You're engaged?"

"No. I have no idea who the lawyer's son is, but I'm sure he's perfect for my sister. My mother is ever hopeful, and Natalie is a cruel and spiteful cousin."

She did her best evil laugh then poked me in the side. "You really should call your mom though."

“And tell her about me and Nick?” I may have sounded a bit more panicked than Nick would have liked.

He did not seem amused. “Why not?”

Natalie sighed. “As much as I would love to be privy to that conversation, no. I think you should call and tell her you’re all right.”

Now I wasn’t amused. “Why would she think otherwise?”

“You have your phone off again, don’t you?”

Nick repeated his question. “Sam, why not?”

See, this was why I didn’t do relationships. They cause nothing but trouble.

Natalie was very purposefully not meeting my eyes, and I got the feeling Nick was trying very hard not to raise his voice.

“Natalie, I’ll deal with you and your strange request in a minute.” I turned to face Nick fully. “I’ve told you about Mother. This is an instance where I am trying to protect both of us. As soon as she finds out that I’m willing to date you, she’ll want to know who your people are and the grilling will commence. She will not rest until I am either nothing but a bad memory for you or wearing a big honking diamond ring engraved with your name. I decided yesterday that I wanted to take a chance on you, so please excuse me if I need a little more than twenty-four hours to acclimate before planning our future.”

Nick grinned. “You’ve gotten a lot better at confrontation.”

I valiantly resisted rolling my eyes and turned to face Natalie’s smirk. “Don’t you start.”

“Personally, I think Nick could handle her.”

“Personally, I think I hate you both right now. This day is hard enough without adding in Mother’s machinations. Now why do you think she would be worried about my well-being?”

The smirk disappeared. “I may have let it slip that you were attacked during one of the seventy-eight times she’s called me because you refuse to charge your phone in a pathetic attempt at avoiding her.” I had to give her points for trying to slip the admission in among recriminations.

“You let it slip?” I nodded. “There is no way in this world or any other that I will recharge my phone during the remainder of my time here. Maybe after two months she’ll have forgotten I exist and I can go back to a peaceful life. How could you let it slip?”

“It was an accident. I was telling her how busy you are painting and I said something about how I was glad the attack didn’t mess up that too.”

“Yep. I hate you.”

Natalie’s shoulders straightened and she took my hand again. “You have to stop being a victim some time. Why not start now? Stop letting her have so much control over you that you’re afraid to answer your phone.”

As if on cue, Natalie’s phone vibrated in her bag, and we all turned to stare at it. It was uncanny how Mother was able to divine information from thin air. Nick was the closest, so he pulled the phone out and handed it to me. Mother’s number was scrolling across the caller ID. I almost decided to deal with it later, but Natalie was right on one count. I let myself become a victim.

I refused to spend the next two months cowering in India.

I went into the bedroom, answered the phone, and spent the next two hours repeating myself over and over again. Yes, I was safe and no, I wasn't coming home early. She may not have agreed, or even listened to some of it, but I wasn't backing down. My voice was hoarse by the time she eventually accepted that I wasn't going to die on a street corner. I did have to tell her about Nick to distract her, but I figured he deserved it for handing me the phone.

Nick and Natalie left me alone for the conversation. I didn't feel like dealing with them after, so I plugged my phone into the charger and went to bed. So much had happened to me in such a short time, but I wasn't sure I could regret it. I'd covered the painting on the desk, but I didn't need to see it. It was the first piece I'd ever done that tapped into the emotions inside me, and it was anything but vanilla.

The next morning dawned with more clouds but no rain. My hair was curling from the humidity, and Natalie was grumping around the apartment because she couldn't find her good rain boots. Nick joined us for breakfast for once, and I got the impression that it was going to become a regular thing. I noticed him watching my legs, and I was glad I'd chosen the sundress over jeans for once. I wasn't about to risk a thin cotton *salwar* on a day it might rain. No one talked about attacks or rapists or my mother, and I enjoyed myself immensely.

We were almost out the door when Nick caught my wrist and hauled me close. My pulse spiked, and Natalie whistled at us as Nick kissed me goodbye. I admitted to myself that maybe I didn't mind being grabbed so much as long as Nick was doing the grabbing. Before I could do more than take a breath, Natalie had snagged my other wrist

and yanked me away while making kissy noises. For a second, the three of us were connected wrist to wrist to wrist and a laugh bubbled out of me. It was a beautiful moment, and I couldn't imagine any future that didn't have moments like that in it.

By the time Natalie and I arrived at the lab, Abishek had heard all about Neeraj and Sanat. His family knew their families from some club, and they'd spent the morning gossiping after the police had shown up and left with the two boys. I marveled at how closely his account mirrored some of the gossip my sister had told me about her fellow country club members. A half a world away, and I still couldn't escape the vicious underbelly of polite society.

I was glad the police had taken Neeraj and Sanat into custody, and I was relieved that I wouldn't have to deal with them in the lab anymore. Abishek had been shocked to hear that they'd been harassing a teacher, but I didn't think he realized that teacher was Natalie. His grapevine hadn't revealed their roles in Shulpa's disappearance or my attack. I wanted to tell him what I knew about Shulpa, but I wasn't sure how to broach the subject. Our morning conversation was stilted and filled with all the things I couldn't say to him.

By lunchtime, I was ready to beg Natalie for help. Abishek was her student; I was just a friend with too much information. We took our bagged lunches outside so I could beg her in private. Sunlight streamed in the glass doors, reminding me that I'd forgotten my sunglasses again, but as soon as we got outside the wind let us know that a storm was coming. I almost lost my lunch bag to a sudden gust. Despite being almost October, I started sweating as soon as I stepped outside.

Natalie took one look at the empty courtyard and turned on me. “Are you sure you want to eat out here? I have a very nice desk in my office with two chairs and no chance of tornadic activity.”

I was having trouble keeping my sundress in place, but I was determined to have this conversation away from prying ears. “We’ll make it quick.” I ate my sandwich in record time and waited patiently for Natalie to finish chewing before I peppered her with questions. “What am I supposed to do about Abishek? Should I tell him the truth? Some of the truth? Lie to him? Avoid him altogether? I’m leaning toward the last one.”

“This is why you dragged me out here?”

“I need help and I’m asking for it instead of making a mess of things on my own. Be grateful I learned something from you.”

Natalie shoved the rest of her sandwich in her mouth and spoke around it. “Don’t tell him anything. This part of Shulpa’s life is over, and she’s happy at Mr. Prasad’s farm.”

“How do you know that?”

“She sent Mrs. Prasad a letter to give to me. I don’t think she knows about the arrests yet, but I get the feeling she doesn’t care. Mrs. Prasad told her she could return, that her family wanted her back, but Shulpa insists she has to stay to protect her them. She’s trying to move forward. You should follow her lead and forget about the whole situation when it comes to anyone beyond us. Now, I’m going back inside before those clouds pop open.”

I looked over my shoulder at the same black clouds I’d seen once before.

Intellectually, I knew there was no connection between the weather and bad things happening at the school, but I followed close on Natalie's heels anyway. I'd finished my project with Mrs. Prasad, so I had a couple of hours to work on a new sketch I had in mind for Natalie. The thought didn't cheer me as much as it should have.

I shivered as the air conditioning in the lab dried my sweat into cold little points against my skin. A loud rumble of thunder shook the light fixtures, but none of the kids looked up. Teenagers had unparalleled levels of focus sometimes. I looked around and my gaze landed on Abishek in the corner. He was frowning at the screen and typing furiously. I wanted to find some way to make peace with the knowledge I had, but I didn't think Natalie's way would work for me. I couldn't just forget Shulpa, even if I'd never met her.

It grated on me that the police hadn't believed her because she was a poor Indian girl, but they'd believed me because I was a rich American woman. After everything she'd been through, Shulpa was as happy with her place on that farm as I'd been upset that Nick had dared to show an interest in me. I'd thought to keep Nick away so he didn't bruise my heart; I wasn't willing to risk even a little pain for the possibility of a greater joy. Shulpa was giving up her entire life so her family wouldn't lose their place in society. The standards of survival and fulfillment in India were so far removed from what I was used to in Austin that I had to completely rearrange my worldview in order to adapt. What Shulpa was doing and her joy in being able to do it, that was real sacrifice.

Life went back to normal after that, or what could be considered normal for us. Abishek never asked about Shulpa again, and I never saw the detectives after that either.

The monsoon season passed with barely a whimper, and Natalie never did find her good rain boots. I suspect Maggie stole them. It only took one time of Maggie walking in on me and Nick engrossed in each other for her to start looking for other prey. That's not to say that she didn't show up randomly to harass us, but it kept life interesting. It wasn't long before I was spending half my nights with Natalie's snoring and half my nights hogging Nick's glorious bed. It was just as comfortable as I expected. Best of all, I had something new to paint every day. As far as I was concerned, I never wanted to leave.

*{ what happens in india... }*

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12

Two and a half months later, I was even less eager to leave.

My last day at the school was unexpectedly bittersweet. I'd already packed for my flight, but it didn't leave for another day, so I insisted on coming in. Natalie was planning to leave early to run some errands, but there was no reason I couldn't finish the day on my own. I spent the morning with Abishek as usual, but then Mrs. Prasad asked me to come into her office.

She'd found a visitor's chair somewhere, and we had a polite conversation over tea. My opinion of Mrs. Prasad had shifted as I spent time working for her on and off. She was a nice lady, but I was still somewhat intimidated by her. By the time both our cups were empty, I had figured out that this was her way of saying goodbye to me as an equal. I thanked her and stood to leave, but she offered me one last surprise.

"When you come back to India, I would like for you to work for me."

I was speechless for a moment, and she waited with her hands folded neatly on

the desk. “I’m not sure I’m ever coming back.”

She smiled, an expression I still wasn’t used to from her. “You will come back. I can see India in you.”

I nodded, not sure what else to do, and she ushered me out. My bag was still in my office, so I took my time collecting it and tidying up. I rubbed at the ache behind my breastbone and took a good look at my office before I left. It seemed I was going to miss the school and the students after all.

I walked out by myself. The lab was darker in late afternoon. I hadn’t realized how much sunlight came through in the morning. A soft click jerked my head toward the door. The hair on the back of my neck stood up as I scanned the shadows. It felt like someone was watching me. I stood next to an empty cubicle halfway between Natalie’s office and my own, and I wondered if I should turn around and run. It was the same feeling I’d been battling since the night of the attack, but it came less and less as time went by. I’d moved to head back to Natalie’s office when someone called my name.

“Sam?”

My breath whooshed out of me in relief. “Abishek, what are you doing here still?”

He came around the corner looking sheepish. “I waited for you”

I approached him, and patted his shoulder. He blushed hard, and I remembered too late again that women didn’t touch men in India. “Sorry. Thank you for waiting.”

He shrugged. “It is not safe at dark. I waited so you are not alone.” Before my time in India, I would have brushed off his concern with claims that I could take care of

myself, but I'd been irrevocably changed. It wasn't a sign of weakness to accept help, and it wasn't a sign of strength to be alone.

I was careful not to touch him again as we walked out of the building together. The sun was getting low over the squat buildings of the school. Neither of us said anything else. Abishek waved as he climbed on his bike at the gate and sped off.

I wasn't dreading going back to the States, but I was going to miss the people in India. The train slowed, and the announcer called my station. My phone vibrated as I gathered my bag and got off. Mother had been calling over and over again all day. I'd done my duty and answered the first call, but that was all I was willing to give her before I was back in her clutches.

The flower seller on the corner caught my attention by waving a bouquet of yellow lilies at me. I loved yellow lilies. He smiled, and I pulled a 100 rupee note out of my bag. It was twice what the flowers were worth, but I was feeling generous. The flowers were so pretty and cheerful that I didn't feel like haggling.

The apartment felt empty when I walked in. All the lights were off, and no one was making noise. I wasn't surprised. Natalie had been pretty adamant about needing to leave early for something. My phone vibrated, so I pulled it out. It was my mother. Again.

I put the lilies in a water glass on the side table, tossed my bag on the couch, and headed into my room. Natalie's clothes had started to migrate to my side of the room again. My clothes weren't doing any better. I'd been throwing them over the back of my desk chair, and it looked like it was going to topple at any second. Food wrappers were

strewn across the floor, and I had at least six water glasses next to my bed. There was a lot of chaos in the room, but it was manageable.

Before I started putting up the paintings, I straightened both of our messes. It took almost an hour of cleaning before the room looked neat, but it was worth it. I could see my desk again and move around unhindered. I pulled the frames out and sat on my newly made bed to sort through them.

The paintings stood out against my white bedspread. I'd searched through three different markets and one scary thrift store before finding enough frames for all the canvases. They were a hodge podge of materials and designs, but when I laid them all out, they looked good together. I left the first painting I'd done of the girl with the flower on my desk to give to Nick that night. The last one I hung was the one of Nick that I'd done just for Natalie. I'd painted him wearing only the tattered blue towel he'd had when we first met and a grin.

My bamboo got a place of honor on Natalie's desk. I'd never looked up how to make it healthy again, but it was sending out tiny leaves from the top of the shoots, so I must have been doing something right. My side of the room looked empty with all my stuff packed, but all the paintings I'd hung made up for it. The sun had gone down while I worked, so I decided to see what I could find to make my stomach stop growling. I'd just closed the bedroom door behind me when the screen door banged open. Natalie and Nick walked in trailing the scent of pepperoni pizza.

"I'm telling you, *Plants vs. Zombies* will change your life," said Natalie.

Nick shook his head and dropped a stack of pizza boxes on the coffee table before

he noticed me. He smiled and said, “Welcome home.”

I didn’t have the chance to respond because our apartment was invaded by a horde of people. There were a wide variety of nationalities, but everyone seemed to be in their twenties and dressed for a night out at a club. Someone had brought an MP3 dock and started blasting music in the courtyard. Through the crowd mingling in our living room, I could see a few couples outside dancing in the shadows. Natalie laughed at the look on my face and launched herself at me. After a few moments, she loosened her grip enough for me to sink down onto the couch next to my bag. “What’s going on?”

“We planned a little surprise party for you, and we brought you dinner. We weren’t sure how long you would be and you know how cranky Nick gets when he hasn’t eaten.”

“Hey, you were the one who insisted she was wasting away,” said Nick.

She shoved a white paper sack at me, which I grabbed out of reflex. “We got you a pineapple and a couple of orders of fries. A fresh pineapple, not the rotisserie kind you were inhaling before.”

“I’m sure it’ll be delicious,” I put the sack on the coffee table and my bag vibrated against my hip. I pulled my phone out, checked the caller ID, and ignored it. “Who are all these people?”

Nick shrugged, but Natalie blushed a deep pink. “How was I supposed to know that Maggie would invite all her snobby friends? For that matter, how was I supposed to know Maggie had any friends besides us?”

Maggie was conspicuously absent. My phone vibrated again. I groaned and hit

ignore.

“Aren’t you going to answer that?” asked Nick.

“Nope.” I dug out the fries from the bag and spoke between mouthfuls. “Mother has been calling every hour on the hour to be sure I’m actually getting on the plane and to tell me about all the wonderful decisions she’s made about my life now that I’m coming home. She, like someone else I know,” I sent a pointed look to Natalie, “has yet to realize that the new Sam doesn’t take kindly to people making decisions for her.”

“Mhmm, and the next time you can’t decide whether or not to do something dangerous, we should just sit back and make popcorn?”

“Yes?” I threw a French fry at her. “Stop making me sound stupid.”

Nick stood and stretched. “I’m going to go hide in my room until all these people go away or until I fall asleep. Whichever comes first.” He leaned down to kiss my cheek and whispered in my ear. “Stay with me tonight?”

I nodded and tried not to blush. It wasn’t like it would be the first time.

Natalie sighed as his door closed. “You guys will make such beautiful babies.”

I threw another fry at her. “No babies. Have you noticed that you, me, and Nick are all total slobs and are constantly hitting each other with food and other things?”

She mimicked hitting my leg. We heard Maggie’s voice before we saw her saunter in from the courtyard, and I assumed from her tone that she was talking to the latest poor shmuck she had her sights on. She sounded warm and friendly, and I nearly fell off the couch when she thanked Mrs. Barnes for something.

Maggie was on the phone with my mother.

“Of course, Mrs. Barnes. Sam can be such a challenge sometimes. I completely understand.” There was a pause as she approached me and I tried to burrow into the cushions. “Yes, I have her right here. Thank you, again.” She held the phone out to me and smiled.

I recoiled and held my fingers up in a cross. “Why would you do this to me?”

“Don’t be absurd. Your mother is a wonderful lady. I expect to have my phone back the moment your conversation is over. I hope you like the party.”

She winked at me and went into the kitchen when I took the phone from her. I looked at Natalie, who met my eyes with raised brows. Maggie had just said something nice and willingly given me something of hers. Either my mother was more powerful than I had thought, or Maggie got a much stronger sense of diabolical pleasure out of my suffering than I had assumed.

“What do I do?” So much for my assertion that I wasn’t terrified of my family. Mother must have heard me because she started in on the diatribe she’d been saving for me. I winced and put the phone to my ear. Natalie shook her head, pointed to our bedroom, and stood up to leave.

“Mother, can you hold on for a second?” She ignored, so I muted the phone’s mic and grabbed Natalie’s arm before she could get around me. “I should probably warn you. I changed the room around a bit.”

The words had barely left my mouth before Natalie was up and racing. “What did you change? I didn’t think there was enough room for...” She stopped just inside the door. “Your paintings.”

I followed her with Maggie's phone held away from my ear. My mother was capable of going for several minutes without breathing, and I wanted to see Natalie's reaction. She wandered from piece to piece like she was visiting a museum. A smile flitted across her face when she noticed the one of Nick in a towel.

"Why did you put all these up now when you're about to leave?"

I sat on my bed as she stopped next to my desk and touched my first painting. "The room needed a little pizzazz, and I couldn't exactly leave you without something to remember me by."

She turned and grinned at me. "These are for me?"

I couldn't help grinning back. "Only if you want them. All of them except for the one on the desk. That one's for Nick."

"This one needs a place of honor." She took down the painting of Nick in a towel and moved it to a shelf directly across from her bed next to a white, stylized ceramic elephant that I'd missed before. It looked just like the one from the living room on my first night.

She adjusted the angle and came to sit next to me on the bed. I rested my head on her shoulder as we both stared at the shelf and listened to my mother berate me out of fear and love. I didn't dread going home to my family any more, but I was going to miss my family here.

I spent my last night with Nick, and it was painful to say goodbye, as I'd feared it would be. He loved the painting, but he wouldn't accept any tears. He kept saying that the separation was only temporary, and he'd see me soon. I didn't really believe him, but

like me, he didn't want to let go until he had to. I laid next to him in his huge, gorgeous bed, my tears falling on his chest, and listened to him breathe after he fell asleep.

Twenty-four hours later I was back in the smothering embrace of my parents. Mother was ecstatic that I was home before the Winter Ball, which was taking place two and a half weeks after I got back. I spent that time buying new supplies, registering for art and teaching classes, hanging out with Josh, and painting all the hard emotions I wouldn't have admitted to before. I'd been sending him regular emails while I was gone, but he wanted to hear all about Nick so he could tease me mercilessly to my face. Mother declared Nick not suitable husband material and insisted on setting me up with the lawyer's son. She had high hopes that he would escort me to the Ball, but I'd already made plans to go with Josh.

Nick and I emailed every day, and Natalie messaged me every couple of hours. It was a poor substitute for the sheer amount of time we spent together in India. The one time Nick had called me, the reception had been so bad we'd only heard every third word of what the other person was saying. The nights were the worst. I was having trouble sleeping alone in my little apartment in Austin without Natalie's snoring or Nick's warmth. I wouldn't admit it to anyone, but I'd borrowed one of Nick's shirts when I left and I slept in it every night. Loki was upset at first, but he adapted like a champ. I'd resolved that I was going to try to accept the joy in my life where I could find it, and Nick's sunshine scent was joyful for me. Everything else I used as fodder for my art.

As much as I'd hoped things would change at home, it was the same deal as

before I'd left. The only thing that changed was me. After yet another disagreement with Mother about the Ball, I remembered a point Abishek had made trying to explain the caste system to me. The veneer of respectability and the importance of social standing created a thin line between *Brahmin* and low class. Mother placed so much importance on the Winter Ball because it was a way to convince the rest of the country club set that she was one of them. Her sense of self was shaped entirely around what other people thought of her. It contrasted sharply with Shulpa and the loyalty she felt for her family's image. She would rather start a new life where she never saw them again than damage their respectability.

In comparison, the drama surrounding the Winter Ball seemed petty and superficial. Loyalties were formed and dissolved with equal ease based on cocktail banter and who wore what dress. Even knowing this, I couldn't figure out a good way to extricate myself from it. The night of the ball, I sent my Mother on ahead with instructions to find us a good table, the first step in creating an appropriately superior position for the evening. She was delighted that I was finally taking an interest in the subtle one-upmanship of society life. Madeline and John would probably be there already.

I'd brought a fancy *sari* home for special occasions, and the Winter Ball seemed like the perfect place to debut it. Mother insisted that I get ready at her house in my old bedroom, so Josh waited for me downstairs in his tux. He was engrossed in his latest video conquest and could care less how late we might be. I glopped on the appropriate lotions and dramatic eye make-up, and I took special care to make my hair artfully

choppy and out-of-control the way I liked it. It looked great with the long, spangly earrings Natalie had bought for me the last time we went to Sarojini Market together.

The *sari* was made of transparent chiffon in a deep blue and gold pattern over a shimmering gold petticoat and a strapless, handkerchief-style top that Natalie had called a *choli*. My entire back was bare except for the thin knot of material keeping the *choli* in place, and the front came to a point just above my belly button. The petticoat sat low on my hips, so there was a large portion of skin showing in the front too. Nick's first folding lesson hadn't really stuck, but he'd shown me a couple of more times until I got it. As I pinned and looped the chiffon around me, memories suffused me with warmth. I strapped on the sparkly gold heels I'd found in my closet and finally turned to the mirror.

Mother wouldn't recognize me; I almost didn't recognize myself. My cheeks were flushed, and my dragon tattoo was completely visible above the strapless top. The *sari* draped over my shoulder and unfolded over my arm into a gorgeous swirling pattern of gold on blue. The jewel tones shone under the soft lights, and I knew they'd stand out among the usual silver and white decorations at the Ball. I had curves and attitude, and I could almost hear Nick's voice in my ear telling me I looked beautiful.

Natalie would be proud.

I came down the stairs carefully, the one thing no one warned me about was how hard it was to walk in a *sari* with four inch heels, and found Josh in the game room. He must have heard my heels on the hardwood floors because he was already saving the game when I stopped in the doorway. Josh turned and did a double-take. It shored up my confidence that I looked the part.

He grinned and offered his elbow. "Shall we?"

Dad had sent the car back for us, so we arrived in style as was expected. The night was unseasonably warm, so I didn't even need a wrap. I didn't recognize any of the people milling about outside on the terraces, but then the real power players always stayed inside. Better vantage point to watch for gossip in the making.

The double doors were open to the cool night air, and the attendant raised a brow at my outfit but didn't stop me. The Winter Ball was traditionally held in the main reception hall, and this year was no exception. Under the soaring ceilings, the chandeliers were dimmed so the light seemed to pool and provide pockets of shadow. The tables and windows were draped in dark silver material, and flickering candlelight drew my attention to the glittering naked branches gathered in crystal vases as centerpieces. There were probably thirty tables positioned around a central dance floor, with buffets spread unobtrusively around the perimeter.

The popular style of the season must have been a sleeveless, sheath dress in a pastel shade because I saw no less than ten women in the first thirty seconds wearing a variation of it. They sipped champagne as they flitted from one table to the next. There was never much distinction among the men as all tuxedos looked the same to me.

Josh and I only made it a few steps into the room before the muttering started. The society princesses in their matching gowns stared, and as we reached Mother's table, I heard a gasp. Mother was looking at me in horror, but for once, I felt like myself instead of a Stepford clone. Dad and Madeline weren't in residence at the table, but a small group of Mother's cronies had perched around her throne. I released Josh and took

a slow turn so they could get the full effect.

“What do you think?”

Mother’s smile stretched so far I worried she might actually injure her face. “You look lovely, dear. I see you chose not to wear the beautiful sheath I laid out for you.”

“Sorry, Mother. I didn’t even notice it. Hello ladies.” I noticed that the smiles on the women around my mother grew as hers became more brittle.

“You remember Paul, Michael Cavendish’s son?” She gestured at an average-looking guy with a business haircut sitting near her at the table. “I was just telling him how much you were looking forward to seeing him tonight.”

I nodded at him and took a seat across the table from Mother’s nest of harpies. Josh abandoned me at that point to hit the dessert bar. I sat through retellings of three weddings full of thinly veiled insults before I was desperate enough to take Paul up on his repeated offers to dance. It had been less than an hour, and I was already done with the Winter Ball. I didn’t belong with these people in this temple to polish and façade.

On the dance floor, Paul seemed unsure of where to put his hand due to all the bare skin and finally settled on the portion of my hip that was covered with several layers of fabric. I kept getting glimpses of Mother watching with a smug smile as he led me through an uninspired waltz. He stared over my shoulder in silence instead of insisting on inane small talk, and for that I was grateful.

India had changed me. Not just the country, but the adventure of traveling, of journeying off into the unknown. I wondered what China would change. Or Argentina. Or Canada. I’d thought Natalie’s world was strange three months ago, and maybe I was

right, but I'd also learned to embrace the strange. At least that world was steeped in authentic life. I looked around at all the sameness and remembered how Mother refused to understand my decisions. I was India; I was strange to them. I'd decided to thank Paul politely and leave after the dance, but we never made it to the end of the song.

A hand stroked down my bare back, and the familiar smell of sunshine drifted over my shoulder. I didn't spare Paul another thought as I spun around in shock. Nick was standing in front of me in a tuxedo, grinning. My mouth was hanging open, but I couldn't seem to make it move.

"Mind if I dance with my girlfriend?" He spoke over my shoulder, but his eyes didn't leave my face as he wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me close.

The song changed from a traditional waltz to a more modern slow dance, which was good because I had no idea how to waltz while pressed against someone. "Not that I'm not thrilled to see you, but what are you doing here?"

He laughed. "I told you I'd see you soon. You didn't think I'd let you get away this easily, did you?"

"You know, some would consider your stalker tendencies creepy."

He leaned down and brushed his lips over mine. "Don't lie. You love my stalker tendencies."

My lips tingled and I wished we were anywhere except on a crowded dance floor within eyeshot of my mother. "Seriously, what are you doing here?"

"The agency provides Natalie and me with plane tickets to visit home once a year during winter break. We have three weeks before we have to fly back. We were hoping

you'd return the favor and let us stay with you."

"Natalie's here too?"

He jerked his chin toward the champagne fountain. "She's over there talking to your brother."

I closed my eyes and rested my head against his shoulder. "I missed you guys so much."

His arms tightened around me, and our slow circles stopped completely. "India's not the same without you, Sam."

I snaked my arms around his waist and squeezed. "I don't think it'll ever be the same here either."

"That's the same thing I thought the first time I came back too." My eyes opened as the music changed again to a fast Latin beat. Nick tugged me off the dance floor before we could get trampled and ran his hand through his hair.

A half a room away, I could see Mother standing and searching the crowd. Madeline had joined her at the table, but my father was still missing. On the other side of us, Natalie had her hand on Josh's shoulder and he looked way too pleased with himself. The choice was an easy one.

I laced my fingers through Nick's and pulled him toward the black sheep of my family. "What do you say we get out of here before Natalie gets herself arrested for giving alcohol to a minor?"

"I'd say I think you know her too well." He raised our linked hands and kissed my fingers. "You look beautiful, by the way."

I grinned at him over my shoulder. "I know." Just beyond Nick, I caught sight of my father standing near one of the heavy silver curtains. He was so close it looked like he was trying to hide behind it. His phone illuminated his face as he frowned down at it, and I knew he was playing one of his word games. A wave of love crashed through me at the image. It looked like I wasn't the only one in my family who didn't want to belong.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Nicole Hall

Place of birth: Houston, Texas

## Education

B.A., Stephen F. Austin State University, May 2005  
Major: English

M.A., Stephen F. Austin State University, May 2007  
Major: English (Creative Writing emphasis)

Dissertation title: Strange Land

## Academic Positions

Fiction Editor, *The Cream City Review*, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 2010-Present.

Graduate Teaching Assistant, English Department, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 2009-Present.

Tutor, PMG Educational Services, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 2007-Present.

Assistant Editor/Reader, *The Cream City Review*, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 2008-2010.

Assistant Editor/Reader, *Real: Regarding Arts and Letters*, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas, 2005-2007.

Graduate Teaching Assistant, English Department, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas, 2005-2007.

Tutor, Academic Assistance and Resource Center-Writing Center, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas, 2002-2005.

### Publications

- “Bachelorette Party.” *The Literary Circular* (Fall 2009).
- “Parlay.” *The Literary Circular* (Spring 2010).
- “Undefined.” *Vex Literary Journal* (Issue 1: Fall 2012).
- “Parlay.” *A Handful of Dust* (Issue 10: June 2013).
- “The Domestic Enemies of the Graduate Student Mom.” *Rants from Mommyland* (April 2013).

### Awards and Honors

- Graduate, Summa Cum Laude, Stephen F. Austin State University, May 2005.
- Graduate, School of Honors, Stephen F. Austin State University, May 2005.
- Winner, Alumni Award for Outstanding Graduate Student in the School of Liberal Arts, Stephen F. Austin State University, May 2005.
- Honorable Mention in Who’s Who Among American College and University Students, 2002.

### Fellowships and Grants

- Graduate Teaching Assistantship, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, August 2009-May 2010.
- Graduate Assistantship, Stephen F. Austin State University, August 2005-May 2007.
- University Scholars Scholarship, Stephen F. Austin State University, August 2001-May 2005.

### Presentations and Invited Readings

- Presentation, “Just Short of the Dark Side: A Case Study of Journals as Guided Reflections,” *Emerging Compositions and Other Digressions: A UWM Professional Development Conference in First Year Composition*, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, May 1, 2010.
- Presentation, “‘It’s about growth’: Creative Writing Workshops Models in the Composition Classroom,” *The Sixteenth Annual First-Year Composition Graduate Student Conference*, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, December 7, 2009.

Master of Ceremonies, *Student/Faculty Reading Series: "United We Read"*, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, March 27, 2009.

Fiction Reading, "Strange Land," *Student/Faculty Reading Series: "Introduce Yourself"*, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, September 17, 2008.

Fiction Reading and Q & A, "Fortune Cookie," *Four Stories*, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas, April 13, 2007.

Participant, "Undefined," *A Portrait of the Artist as a Portrait*, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas, March 28-30, 2007.

Panelist, "Undergraduates Speak: A Classroom Experience in Role-playing Games at Stephen F. Austin State University", *Louisiana State University Merging Word & Image Mardi Gras Conference*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, February 3-5, 2005.

#### Courses Taught

##### University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Introduction to Creative Writing, Fall 2010-Fall 2011

Introduction to College Writing, Fall 2009-Spring 2012

Young Adult Literature, Fall 2011

##### Bryant and Stratton College

Research and Writing I, Fall 2010

Research and Writing II, Fall 2010

Business and Technical Writing, Spring 2011

##### PMG Educational Services

ACT Test Preparation, Fall 2007-Fall 2010

##### Stephen F. Austin State University

Research and Argument, Spring 2007

Rhetoric and Composition, Fall 2006

Substitute, Linguistic Theory, Fall 2005

### Additional Professional Experience

Coordinator, ACT Test Preparation Classes, PMG Educational Services, 2007-Present.

Coordinator, Fab 5 Writing Contest, Wisconsin Romance Writers of America, Spring 2009.

Coordinator, Visiting Writers Committee, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2008-2009.

Coordinator, Student Faculty Reading Series, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2008-2009.

Judge, University Interscholastic League Ready Writing Contest, Stephen F. Austin State University, April 22, 2006.

Certified, CRLA Tutor Level 3, Academic Assistance and Resource Center, Stephen F. Austin State University, 2005.

### Memberships

Sigma Tau Delta English Honor Society.

Modern Language Association.

Association of Writers and Writing Programs.

Wisconsin Chapter, Romance Writers of America.

Fantasy, Futuristic, and Paranormal Chapter, Romance Writers of America.