



The Star Kin Chronicles

EXTRAORDINARY PART I

By Evie Asterwyn

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Acknowledgements

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For Shannon, the love of my life.

You have taught me so much about love, life and laughter.

Without you to steady me, I would be long lost down the river of my dreams.

Without your support and encouragement, I would never have endeavored to write,
let alone publish, my first novel.

I love you.

* * * * *

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About The Star Kin Chronicles

Sneak Peek – Extraordinary Part 2

Prologue

All I ever wanted to be was a little extraordinary. But now all I want is to be ordinary again.

It's funny, isn't it, how life does that to you. Or perhaps it's just human nature, wishing for the greener side of the fence. One moment you are just an ordinary person, wishing for a little more adventure, a little more excitement – anything to break the day to day rules and restrictions you live by. Living with a simple wish, deep inside, to step outside your comfort zone, to become more: more noticeable, more amazing, more alive. Then when you have that in your grasp, when the opportunity arises to leave the less than exciting life behind, something happens; something that you never expected, something you weren't prepared to face. And there you are, looking back and wishing you were ordinary again.

This is my story. It's the story of an ordinary girl, in her ordinary world. A world that suddenly changes, shattering like a mirror under an unexpected impact, falling into a thousand pieces and revealing a magical world with all its joys and fears. The mirror pieces lie destroyed, yet so beautiful, shooting glorious rainbow reflections as far as the eye can see, mesmerizing and shimmering in that moment.

It's only after some time passes that you realize you cannot piece it back together, not the way it was. The cracks always show, no matter how strong the glue, no matter how carefully you try to reassemble it. There will always be those minuscule shards missing that will never be found, and ones that will never fit into place again. The mirror will always be fractured.

Introducing Cassandra Stone

My life began, as most do, with a mom and a dad, a house in the suburbs, a childhood with school friends on the playground. When I was young, I never realized I would one day be amazing. I never dreamed that my life would change in just a fraction of a second.

I grew up living an ordinary life. I never tried to be troublesome. I went to school, did my homework and hung out with my friends. I visited my uncles, aunts and grandparents regularly. I read lots of books in my spare time. I played music in my room a little too loud at times, much to my parent's annoyance. I laughed. I cried.

My parents did the best job they knew how to, in raising me. They taught me manners, morals and right from wrong. I never intentionally hurt my friends or family. If I did something wrong, my parents taught me to apologize, to make up for my mistakes, to ask for forgiveness and to forgive when asked. I tried to be kind to those less fortunate, to be aware of those around me, to be mindful of feelings and emotions. Perhaps I took it all to heart more than I should have. I know I never went out of my way to be unkind or cruel, in any case.

But as I grew up, I realized that there were others who did not treat people how I did. They were the ones who would bully me, picking on me when I tried to help someone less able to defend themselves. They were the ones who would take advantage of my ingrained kindness. They were the ones who were jealous of my good – and well earned – exam marks. I tried my best to ignore them. After all, I did not want to upset my parents by getting into trouble for responding to their taunts. However, some would not stop at taunts. They would hurt me, trying to get a reaction. At the worst times, I would hide inside my head, in imaginary worlds that held safety and warmth from the cold, hard truth that the world was offering me.

And when it all became too much, I would hide in my books, wrapping myself in the adventures of the people I wished I could become: the heroes in my books that had the smart answers to life's tough questions; the heroes that adventured and won out over the bad guy, despite the bad guy's best efforts; the heroes who chose the decent path, the road less travelled, yet still came out on top. At night I would lie in

bed, read my books and fall asleep to dream of one day being the person who would avenge all the poor, innocent souls from the evils in the world. Then I would wake up, sorely disappointed that I was just boring old me.

Occasionally, I would search the back of my wardrobe for the doorway to a secret world. I would press my hand against a mirror, hoping that it would liquidize and that I would pass through. I would run around, pretending I could fly and hoping against hope that my feet would actually leave the ground. Of course, that never happened.

I went to high school. I got an after school job. My books got left on the shelves, covered in dust, but the morals of their stories stuck with me. Wishing I could be the superhero? I would laugh at myself, knowing it was all made up, as I went about my daily grind. Instead, I would draw on their strengths when my days got too tough. I would draw on their kindness when old Mrs. Hutchinson would get confused in our store, and I would help her finish her shopping, helping her through the checkout and to her car. She would always smile at me and say, "Ah, dear girl, what would I do without you?" I would smile and wave as she drove out of the parking lot, secretly pleased that I had done one good thing that benefited someone else.

I knew I was not perfect. I was prone to fits of temper when things got frustrating. However, I would apologize to those I yelled at and all would be well again. I knew I could be selfish as well. I would sometimes catch myself wishing I were in someone else's shoes, someone better off, more popular, or more beautiful. I would wish myself more extraordinary. Then, with a heavy heart, I would tell myself off:

"Don't wish for what you haven't got. Be happy with what you have. Life could be much, much worse you know!"

I sat my exams in my junior years of high school, with great passing marks due to my constant studying. My friends always teased me, calling me "Einstein", but they never meant it in a cruel way. It was always said with affection; much the same way we called Isobel, our artistic, zany friend, a "hippy" and Gina, the one who loved to shop, a "fashionista". Terms of endearment that spoke more of our natures than our names would ever indicate.

So that was me, the boring and ordinary Cassandra Stone. And this is the story of how my life became extraordinary.

First Day of Senior Year

My cellphone woke me, its ringtone a popular song I loved. However, I did not love it this early in the morning.

“Uhhh, I have to change that!” I groaned while my hand felt blindly around on my bedside table. It soon landed on the smooth surface of my phone.

I cracked my eyes open to see what I was doing, the glow from the phone sharp in the dawn’s dim light. I pressed the answer button and held the phone to my ear.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Cassie!” my friend Gina O’Halloran’s voice chirped down the line.

“Gina! Do you have any idea what time it is?”

“Time you were up and out of bed!”

I groaned again and looked over at my alarm clock. 7 A.M.

“Gina, it’s seven o’clock. Why on earth would I be out of bed now?”

“C’mon! I need you here, Einstein! I’ve got to decide what to wear for our first day back at school!”

I rolled over, burying my face in my pillows. Gina really was too much sometimes, especially on the first day back at school.

“I’m still in holiday mode,” I complained, muffled by the pillow. “I need more time! Five more minutes, Mom!” I was smiling though. Gina’s enthusiasm was often infectious, even at 7 A.M.

“C’mon, Einstein. I want your opinion on a couple of skirts. I’ve got to catch Tony’s eye this year for sure!”

Tony was the guy that Gina had an immense crush on. She had been crushing on him since he started at our school, Castle Rock High School, the previous year. I sighed and rolled back over, before sitting up and throwing my legs over the side of my bed.

“Okay! I’m up! I’m up!” I laughed. “I’ll be there soon. Don’t make any rash decisions!” I said, pretending to be serious.

I hung up and then sighed. School again this year. Senior year this year. Maybe this year would be special. Maybe this year I would make my mark.

I glanced over at my outfit for the day, which I had laid out the night before. It was my standard outfit: blue jeans, pale blue blouse and my favorite green jacket. I exhaled heavily, thinking to myself out loud:

“Or maybe not.”

I stared out the window as I dressed, looking out across my hometown of Castle Rock, Washington. It was going to be another cloudy day, which was not that unusual in our little corner of the world. Castle Rock, situated on the banks of the Cowlitz River and known as the ‘Gateway to Mount St. Helens’, was a bit of a tourist hot spot, mostly because of the hot spot under Mount St. Helens. I had spent most of my teenage years here; however, the beautiful vista of Mount St. Helens and Mount Adams to the west of our township still took my breath away some days. That is, on days you could see the mountains past the cloud cover that seemed to consistently hover overhead. The forest, mud and ash flats in the distance were an unusual vista. To the east was the Cowlitz River which, in itself, was a pretty good view. If you really wanted to ‘get away from it all’ you could always go to Silver Lake’s camping grounds, situated about five miles west of Castle Rock.

The sight that met my eyes out the window was one of an overcast day, threatening rain. However, it usually only threatened at this time of year.

“I just hope it doesn’t rain,” I said to myself, as I smoothed my blonde hair up and into a ponytail. I checked my reflection in the mirror, picked up my bag and hurried downstairs.

Mom was already up, with breakfast on the table.

“Morning, sweetheart!” She smiled at me. “Big day today!”

“Hi, Mom.” I smiled back at her and grabbed a piece of toast off the plate by my chair. “It’s the first day of my last year of preparing for the rest of my life,” I joked.

She laughed.

“Are you going to Gina’s this morning?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’ve got to help her catch Tony’s eye this year!” I laughed, rolling my eyes.

I kissed Mom goodbye and headed out to my car. I unlocked the green hatchback and tossed my bag on the passenger seat before sliding in.

I arrived at Gina’s about five minutes later. She met me at the door, still clad in her dressing gown and fluffy slippers. I raised my eyebrows, but was not really surprised.

“Oh my gosh! First day back! And I still don’t know what I’m going to wear!” she exclaimed as she enveloped me in a hug.

“Nice to see you too, Gina!” I teased, hugging her back.

She grasped my hand and pulled me along behind her as we headed upstairs to her room. It looked like a hurricane had torn through her closet and deposited clothes on every available surface of her room. Our other best friend, Isobel Greenslade, was already there, perched on the end of the bed, looking a bit shell-shocked.

“Hi, Cassie!” She smiled nervously at me, her eyes still travelling around the disaster that was Gina’s room.

“Hey, Izzy.” I smiled sympathetically at her. “What are we going to do with her?” I stage whispered, looking across at Gina.

Gina had pinned a shirt in place against her front with her chin. She was standing in front of the mirror holding one skirt, then another, in front of her.

“Help me, I hope!” she mumbled as she turned to face us. “Which do you think?”

Izzy and I looked at each other, rolled our eyes at the same time and started giggling.

We helped Gina pick what to wear, Izzy’s eye for color and accessories coming in handy. I still did not understand how I had managed to become friends with the two most clothing conscious people in the whole school, when I was just a Plain Jane who wore jeans and tee-shirts most of the time.

Once Gina was dressed, she pulled both of us in front of her mirror and made us face it with her.

“Well, girls,” she said, smiling cheerfully, “this is going to be an awesome year! And just think, next year we are off to college!”

We returned her smile, as I eyed our reflections in the mirror. Izzy’s dark, curly hair framed her delicate, mocha face and her easy smile lit up her chocolate-brown eyes. Gina was beaming at both of us, her auburn hair and green eyes a stunning combination against her pale, Irish skin. I looked away from their reflections to mine. My blonde hair up in a messy ponytail, my blue-green eyes and my shy smile were no match for the beautiful girls I stood with. I smiled again, but perhaps a second too late. Gina caught my lack of enthusiasm and turned to me.

“Cassie,” she said. “What’s wrong?”

I sighed. If only I could explain what I felt.

“Oh, nothing really. I’m just a bit nervous, I guess.”

Izzy hugged me then.

“C’mon, Cassie, it’ll be fine! Same as last year, just the exams are harder.”

“And that will still be a breeze for you, Einstein!” Gina laughed, tugging on my ponytail.

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” I sighed.

“What then?” Izzy asked, concern clouding her beautiful eyes.

“I’m just... I don’t know, forget it,” I said. How could I possibly explain to my best friends that I felt too ordinary, that I wished my life had more excitement in it?

“Come on, Cassie, spill,” Izzy said.

“Yeah Cass, I’m all ears,” Gina said, pulling me down to sit on the bed beside her.

“I just don’t know if you guys will understand,” I started. “It’s hard to explain.”

Gina and Izzy exchanged glances.

“Try us,” Izzy said softly.

“Yeah,” Gina said gently. “We are your best friends after all.”

I sighed, trying to think of the way to put this without upsetting them. They waited.

“Okay, this is going to sound strange. I don’t know how to explain it, exactly.” I looked up at my two best friends. Their eyes were boring into me, expectantly. “Well... I’m afraid that I’m just too ordinary.”

I closed my eyes as I said it, afraid of what their faces would show. I reached back, grabbed a pillow off the bed and held it to my face as I blushed.

“You guys probably think I’m crazy,” I murmured into it.

Their silence was deafening. I peeked up out of the pillow, looking first at Izzy, then at Gina. They appeared to be mirror images, both staring at me, then at each other, open-mouthed.

Gina spoke first.

“Cassandra. Stone. Are. You. Insane?”

“No... at least I don’t think so,” I replied softly, mostly into the pillow.

“Oh my gosh, Cassie,” Izzy said, smiling gently. “You have no idea how wrong you are.”

“You are the kindest and least ordinary person I know,” Gina said, shaking her head in disbelief. “How could you possibly think that you are ordinary?”

“Because I *feel* so ordinary!” I moaned, frustrated. “All my life I’ve wished there was something more than just – well – this,” I said, pointing to myself.

“I think I know what you need,” Gina said.

I raised my eyebrows at her.

“Really?” I asked incredulously.

“Absolutely!” she replied, smiling at me mischievously. “After school, we are going shopping and giving you a makeover. It may not be a whole new life, but you’ll feel like a whole new you.”

Izzy squealed, delighted with the idea.

“This is going to be so much fun!”

* * * * *

School started as any other school year did. The students were mostly gathered in the parking lot as we pulled up in my green hatchback. Gina was looking around before I had stopped the car, taking in the student body in general, trying to figure out the new students and how they would fit in.

“Popular. Jock. Popular. Geek. Goth. Goth. AV Nerd...”

Izzy and I rolled our eyes at each other.

“She does this every year!” Izzy sighed.

“The problem is, she’s usually right,” I whispered back.

“Popular. Popular. Cheerleader. Geek... Oh. My. Gosh...” She stopped suddenly.

Izzy and I looked across to where she was staring. Of course, only one person would have this effect on her: Tony Worthington. He was tall and athletic, with blonde hair and blue eyes – a classically good looking guy.

We looked back at Gina.

“Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh! He’s here!”

Her eyes were wide, her face flushing.

“Gina! Breathe!” I said, reaching across and shaking her slightly.

Izzy and I smiled at each other, then jumped out of the car together and ran to the passenger door to help her out.

I smiled at Izzy and chuckled to myself. Gina did this at the start of every semester. She had not ever spoken to Tony and, until recently, was certain that he did not know she existed.

“Gina, remember we talked about this! Pull yourself together girl!” I hissed.

She glanced at me and started breathing again. Suddenly getting control of herself, she straightened her skirt, pulled her bag strap onto her shoulder and squared her shoulders.

“I can do this!” she said.

I could see her jaw was tense, the only small sign that she was nervous. Her inherent cool took over and she glanced up at Tony as he walked towards where we were standing. Izzy and I smiled at each other behind her back as she walked towards him.

“Hi, Tony!” she greeted him sweetly, as she was about to pass him. His dark blue eyes skimmed towards her, away again and then snapped back to her. His jaw dropped.

“Hi!” he said, surprise evident on his face, as he stopped in his tracks. Gina looked up at him and smiled.

“How was your holiday?” she asked, as Izzy and I snuck past. We both turned once we passed them, caught Gina’s eyes and gave her two pairs of thumbs up. We waved and then rushed away, grinning happily.

“Oh my gosh! I can’t believe the look on his face! Could you believe it?” Izzy was nearly squealing with joy for our best friend.

I laughed. Having become friendly with Tony in the last semester of the previous year, I knew he had noticed Gina around. I had encouraged her to speak to him, knowing that Tony was a lot shyer than he let on and that it would work out in Gina’s favor. The work was now done and, after a year of Gina having a huge crush on Tony, they were finally talking.

“Oh, look, here they come!” Izzy pointed back towards the parking lot.

I turned and watched as Gina and Tony, talking animatedly, walked together towards us. Tony glanced up at me, a look of gratitude on his face. I smiled and then pulled Izzy away with me to our start of year assembly.

* * * * *

“I am so happy right now!”

Gina danced ahead of Izzy and me as we walked together through the mall.

Izzy and I smiled at her. All the way through our fifteen minute drive to the Three Rivers Mall in nearby Kelso, Gina had been declaring her happiness and how wonderful her life was.

"I can't believe it! A date! Oh my gosh, Cassie, you were right! Why didn't I talk to him before now? I am so happy!"

"You're welcome," I replied, glad that she was so happy.

"Now we both have a reason to go shopping!"

Gina bounced up and down on her toes excitedly, grabbing my hands in hers. Izzy laughed and led the way into one of the many shops in the mall.

A couple of hours later, we headed home with several bags of clothing, some new makeup and a few other accessories.

Gina set up her version of a home beauty salon in my bathroom and had me try on several tops and skirts, pants and dresses. She and Izzy put these together with some accessories and I suddenly had a few new outfits to wear to school. Then she sat me down on a chair and started working on my makeup. Izzy pulled a brush through my hair as she started to style it.

"The guys at school aren't going to recognize you," Gina exclaimed cheerfully.

"Not once we are finished with you," Izzy added with a laugh.

"Guys, don't go too over the top, please!" I begged, blushing.

Izzy finished with my hair a couple of minutes before Gina finished with my makeup. She ran out of the room, returning with a dark blue blouse, a pair of stonewash jeans and new boots.

"Try these on!" she exclaimed, as soon as I was free to move from Gina's ministrations.

They left the room while I changed. I walked out of the bathroom and into my bedroom. Gina and Izzy were sitting, waiting, on the end of my bed.

"Oh. My. Gosh!" Izzy exclaimed, clapping her hands.

"Wow... just wow!" Gina said, seeming amazed at her handiwork.

They stood up together and moved to where I was standing. I turned to face my full length mirror. For a moment I did not recognize the girl standing there, staring back at me.

"Wow."

"We were right, weren't we?" Gina asked softly.

My hair was down from its usual ponytail. Izzy had curled it slightly and it was parted differently, with the ends swept over one shoulder. The outfit they had chosen for me flattered my slender figure. The color complimented my eyes, bringing out the green in them. The makeup was a finishing touch that added a bit of

glamour to my look. I had never really bothered with it much before, and found myself wondering why.

I smiled, then turned to each of them and hugged them.

“You girls are amazing!” I giggled.

“Just wait until the rest of the school sees you!” Izzy teased.

“They won’t know what hit them!” Gina agreed.

Meeting Alex

The next day I tried my new look out at school. I was feeling shy, concentrating on not tripping over my feet clad in my new boots. A few of the students – particularly the girls who normally ignored me – turned and stared as I walked past, with Gina and Izzy by my side.

“See, they don’t know what hit them!” Gina whispered, giggling softly.

Tony saw us and stood up from where he was seated, on a bench in the courtyard beside the parking lot. He approached slowly, still a bit shy.

“Hey, Gina,” he greeted her, smiling as she walked up to him. “Hey, Izzy...” He paused, as he looked at me. “Oh wow! Cassie, is that you?”

“Oh, cut it out, Tony! You know it’s me,” I laughed.

“You look really nice. Gina and Izzy did a great job with the makeover!” He smiled kindly and then his eyes drifted to Gina. “Shall we?” he asked, offering to escort her to class.

She nodded then smiled, waving back at us as she wandered off with Tony.

“Aww, they are too cute!” Izzy whispered to me as we watched them leave.

I grinned, hugging my folder and two textbooks to my chest.

“Oh, yeah, definitely!” I agreed enthusiastically.

Izzy and I headed to our first classes of the day. Izzy had Algebra and I had English. We agreed to meet up at lunchtime.

I waved goodbye to Izzy as we separated inside the school building. I turned to walk to my locker before going to my first class. My new bag started to slip from my shoulder, so I stopped to hitch it back up into place. Suddenly, one of the textbooks I held between my chest and my rather slippery folder, started to slide south. I scrambled to catch it with my free hand. I shoved it back up from where it had come loose, only to have it push the other textbook up. That textbook teetered awkwardly on top of my arm and, as I struggled to balance it, it toppled over the top of my arm and fell to the ground.

“Oh man!” I exclaimed, sighing in frustration.

My new bag certainly suited my new look, but did not really work well to hold all of my textbooks and folders. I crouched down to pick up the book and, as I reached for it, my Houdini bag made another escape attempt off my shoulder. I grabbed at the strap as it fell down my arm, but it escaped my grasp.

“Darn it, Gina! Izzy! You and your accessories!” I muttered under my breath as I tried to grab the strap, in order to return it to my shoulder.

“Can I help?”

A voice, warm and very masculine, interrupted my grumbling at my absent friends.

I looked up from my bag and saw that a pair of feet, in sneakers, stood just in front of me, near my fallen textbook. Before I could answer, the owner of the feet crouched down, his hand reaching for the textbook.

My eyes travelled up, past black jeans and a green tee-shirt covered by a leather jacket, past broad shoulders to a square jaw, a wry smile and up to the most beautiful, deep, forest-green eyes I had ever seen.

“I... uh...” I stopped, the words stolen from my lips for a moment.

The green eyes sparkled as they held mine, their owner smiling at me. He even had dimples – absolutely gorgeous!

“This is your book, right?” he asked.

“Uh...” I started, still lost for words. *Come on, Cassie, think!* I told myself off in my head. “Oh, yes, I mean. I’m sorry. I’m not usually this clumsy.”

My hand automatically pulled my bag’s strap back onto my shoulder.

He smiled at me, for just a moment longer, then rose up to his feet again, reaching down his other hand and offering it to me.

I reached out and took his hand. It was cool to the touch. I smiled shyly up at him as he helped me back to my feet. He dropped my hand as soon as I was standing again, but his eyes never left my face. He handed me my book.

“Uh, thanks.” I smiled at him, suddenly shy.

“No problem.”

The corner of his mouth hitched up into a grin. His eyes swept over me, taking in my new outfit, from my new green top, to my stonewash denim jeans, down to the new black boots on my feet. Then back up to my face again.

For a moment, I did not know whether to be embarrassed or pleased by his attention. I guessed that I had no right to be annoyed, since I was staring at him just

as much as he was staring at me. He was extremely handsome. His straight, spiky brown hair glinted with hints of gold as it caught the light from the fluorescent lamps above our heads. He was taller than me, about six feet tall. His skin was like alabaster, pale yet clear. The contrast set off his eyes – they seemed to shine. I found myself wondering if his face would be as cool to touch as his hand was. I blushed, embarrassed by my thoughts, but decided I was pleased at his attention, though my heart was beating very fast at this unusual turn of events.

“Are you okay now?” he asked, his voice pleasant to my ears, genuine concern on his face.

“Uh, yes,” I replied, nodding. “I’m fine now, thank you.”

He smiled once more then nodded to himself as he turned and walked away.

I stood there, dumbfounded, as he left. My heart was pounding and my legs felt like jelly. I realized, after a few seconds, that my mouth was hanging open, as if in shock. I snapped it shut.

No guy I had met had ever had this effect on me! Those eyes – almost haunting, yet so warm – stunned me. His manner was so polite, I could almost say old-fashioned. He disappeared around the corner in front of me.

Suddenly, I realized that I had not caught his name.

“Wait!” I called out, sense coming back to me as quickly as it had left. I ran to the corner, dodging the other students heading for their classes. I turned the corner and looked around. But he was gone.

* * * * *

I arrived at my classroom door just as the bell sounded. I quickly walked to the back of the class, where I had my seat.

My teacher, Mrs. Willis, cleared her throat to be heard over the hubbub of the students in class, who were happily chatting amongst themselves.

“Students! Students!” she called, raising her voice to be heard. Slowly the voices petered out and stopped altogether. “Thank you, class.” She smiled, looking over her glasses at us. Satisfied that she had all the students’ attention, she indicated the person standing at her desk.

I glanced up from my books on my desk and over to where Mrs. Willis was standing. My breath caught in my throat as I realized who she was indicating. It was the boy who had rescued my book! He was standing by her desk, looking slightly uncomfortable at all the attention. His eyes flickered around the classroom as Mrs.

Willis spoke, seeming to stop on each student in turn as if taking his own mental roster of who was in the classroom.

“I would like to introduce a new student who has just started at Castle Rock High School, today. This is Alexander Grayson and he has just moved here from...” she paused and checked the notes on her desk, “...from Prince Rupert, British Columbia in Canada. Please do what you can to make him feel welcome.”

She then indicated for him to take a seat. The class was filled with curious whispers and stares as he headed across the room. He soon realized, as I did, that the only available seat was at my table, beside me. The shy smile on his face broadened into a full grin, as he walked towards me, his eyes lighting up in recognition.

“Hello, fair lady,” he said softly, as he dropped down into the seat next to mine. He casually swung his bag under his seat and reached down to pull out his folder. “No more books for me to rescue?” he inquired, with a look of feigned innocence.

I giggled quietly and shook my head.

“No, I’m afraid it’s just the one today,” I replied, my voice barely above a whisper.

Mrs. Willis cleared her throat, settling the students’ whispers and chatter eventually into silence. She gave us instructions on the chapter to read from our textbooks.

I opened mine on the desk in front of me, but realized that Alexander did not have a textbook on the desk in front of him. I raised my eyes from his desk to his face and saw he was looking slightly annoyed. He leaned closer to me and whispered,

“Hey, I don’t have all my textbooks yet. Do you mind if I borrow yours?”

My heart started to race in my chest at his close proximity to me. I could feel the rushed beat of the pulse in my neck as my blood rushed to my face. My words lodged in my throat. All I could do was nod at him, as I tried desperately to gather my wits about me. I pushed the textbook across the gap on the tabletop between us.

“Thanks,” he whispered and, for a moment, his eyes met mine.

His eyes were still beautiful, just as I remembered; however, they were dark hazel, not the rich forest-green I saw earlier. I gasped in surprise. He quickly looked away and down at the book between us.

I turned my eyes to the book as well, wondering if I was imagining things. For a few minutes I pondered, then decided it was impossibility, a trick of the light. I

decided to focus on the questions in front of me and started writing my answers down in my folder.

Mrs. Willis was wandering around the class, her grey hair a stark contrast to the blonde, auburn, brown and black shades scattered around the class. She fussed over one student, then another, clearly loving the work that she did. Eventually she arrived at our desk and inquired after Alexander. *Was he doing okay? Did he understand the work? Oh, and he had been able to share my book?* He answered her questions while I, as usual, avoided drawing attention to myself by keeping my head down while I worked.

Mrs. Willis wandered away towards the front of the class and Alexander and I worked for a while longer. Then he leaned in towards me again and my heart picked up in speed once more. It was kind of annoying, really, the way my body responded to his proximity to me.

“I’m sorry,” he interrupted me, “but I’ve just realized that I don’t even know your name.”

I glanced up at him, surprised. He smiled at me, which had the effect on me of sunshine on a cloudy day. Despite hardly knowing him, I found myself drawn to him. His eyes were warm, green once more – I must have imagined the hazel coloring – and his smile was open and friendly. I smiled back at him.

“I’m Cassandra Stone, but my friends call me Cassie,” I murmured shyly.

He sat back in his seat, still watching me, his eyes appraising.

“Cassie,” he said simply, testing my name on his lips as if he had never heard it before. It was almost like he was saying it for the first time, in a foreign and unfamiliar tongue. He looked thoughtfully towards the front of the classroom, for a few moments, like he was making his mind up about something.

I dragged my eyes away from his gorgeous, pale profile and tried to focus on the questions in front of me. Funnily enough, they were having problems holding my attention.

Just as suddenly as he appeared thoughtful, he seemed to make up his mind about whatever he was thinking, then turned his attention back to the textbook. He did not say anything to me about what he was thinking, and I did not feel that I knew him well enough to ask.

I got to the last question on the page and answered it, then reached towards the textbook to turn the page. At the same time, Alexander did the same thing. His hand brushed mine. Then he yanked his hand away as if he had been shocked.

In that moment I noticed a couple of interesting things: his skin was still cool, even though our classroom was warm; his reaction was unusual, given how warmly he had been treating me just moments earlier; my heart was now skipping beats and I could feel the blood rushing to my face again.

"I – I'm sorry," I whispered, struggling to catch my breath. I gestured helplessly towards the textbook. "Should I...?"

Alexander threw a sidelong glance my way, then smiled at me, suddenly warm again as he reached over towards the book.

"Allow me," he murmured, as he turned the page.

The rest of the lesson passed in a companionable silence. I felt slightly awkward at his attention to me. I had not had much luck with guys in the past and this was foreign territory. However, when the bell rang to signal the end of class, I found myself feeling rather disappointed when he told me his next class was Algebra, while mine was Calculus.

"Well, I guess I'll see you around, then?" I glanced up at him shyly.

He smiled at me.

"Sooner rather than later, I hope!" He turned quickly and left, making it out the door before I had finished collecting up my books.

Second Afternoon at School

By the time I got to lunch, I was dying to share the news of the new student with Gina and Izzy. I met them at our usual table in the lunchroom.

“Hey, Gina! Hi, Izzy!” I exclaimed breathlessly, as I took my seat.

They looked at each other, amused, then back at me.

“Hi, Einstein! What’s got you so worked up?” Gina laughed.

“Oh, only that there’s a new guy at school,” I said, staring casually across the lunchroom towards the windows, which overlooked the courtyard.

Izzy was the first to bite.

“New guy?” she asked, the curious tone of her voice betraying her casual façade.

“Well, if you don’t want to know...” I started, watching the girls out of the corner of my eye. I looked down at my lunch tray on the table, pretending to be intrigued by the so-called food.

“C’mon, Cassie! Spill!” Gina exclaimed.

“Okay,” I said quickly. “So, I’m walking to class, right? This new bag you guys got me was pulling an amazing Houdini act. So I ended up dropping one of my textbooks. Suddenly this awesomely cute – and by that, I mean *gorgeous* – guy comes out of nowhere and picks up my book! Of course, I start stumbling over my words while he’s playing it so cool. It was so embarrassing!”

Gina and Izzy were sitting there, open-mouthed. Not that I blamed them. They had never seen me this worked up over a guy.

“Oh my gosh! What did he say?” Izzy asked.

“Not much, he just asked me if it was my book – not that I was really paying attention, of course. But then he gives it back to me and takes off. I didn’t even get his name!”

“We have to hunt him down!” Gina said excitedly.

“No!” I exclaimed, laughing. “It’s okay! Next thing I know, he’s in my English class – and I’ve got the *only* empty seat next to me!”

“What did you do?” Izzy asked.

“Well, I *tried* to concentrate on the lesson, but he kept talking to me and all I could do was blush! What do I know about talking to cute guys?” I exclaimed.

My face burned at the memory, so I hid it in my arms on the table.

“Hey, it’s okay!” Gina comforted me. “Just introduce him to us and you’ll have nothing to worry about.”

“No!” I exclaimed, looking up at her.

“You don’t want him to meet us?” Izzy looked hurt.

“No, of course I want him to meet you, but I’ve only just met him. Give me a couple of days, maybe...”

“Oh. My. Gosh!” Izzy murmured, interrupting my response.

She was staring behind me, wide-eyed. Gina was sitting there silently, the same incredulous look on her face.

“Guys?” I asked, waving my hand in front of them.

They were watching someone moving behind me. I was about to turn, to see who they were staring at, when a warm voice spoke.

“Hi, Cassie.”

I nearly melted into a puddle right there. I would know that voice anywhere, even though it was new to me.

“Hey, Alex,” I said, turning in my chair to face him.

Gina and Izzy seemed to snap out of their daze and stared at me, then at each other, amazed.

I smiled at them and then up at Alex.

“Would you like to... uh... sit with us?” I asked, sure that he could hear the tremors in my voice.

“Sure, that’d be great.”

He smiled at me, the warmth in his smile lighting up the room – at least to my eyes. I was certain that my lungs had stopped working; I was finding it hard to catch my breath. His eyes were still fixed on me. In one fluid motion, he pulled out his seat, sat down on it and placed his lunch tray on the table. His bag seemed to move from his shoulder to the floor without him touching it. I was sure I had not blinked, but I must have to have missed that.

I was still busy gaping at him when Gina cleared her throat.

“So, Cassie, are you going to introduce us?” she asked pointedly.

“Oh...” I murmured, dragging my eyes from his. I glanced over at my friends, who were grinning openly at me.

“Gina, Izzy, this is Alex Grayson. He’s new,” I said. Then I blushed, realizing how stupid that sounded.

Izzy smiled warmly at Alex.

“Hi, Alex. Nice to meet you. Welcome to Castle Rock High School.”

“Go Rockets!” Gina cheered quietly.

Alex laughed then, a deep, pleasant sound that made me warm right to my fingertips. I wondered if the other girls were being as affected by Alex’s mannerisms as I was.

Tony wandered into the cafeteria and over to our table. Gina pulled up a chair for him from the next table over.

“Hi, Tony!” Izzy and I chorused.

It was Gina’s turn to blush. I glanced over at her and Tony. I was certain they were holding hands under the corner of the table. I raised my eyebrows at her, looking pointedly at the corner of the table, but she just smiled serenely back at me, giving nothing away.

“...and she shared her textbook with me.”

I tuned back into the conversation that Alex was having with Tony. I blushed, realizing that they were talking about me. Alex was smiling at me again.

“It was the least I could do, after you rescued my textbook this morning,” I responded shyly.

My friends seemed keen to make Alex feel welcome at our table. By the end of lunch, I was sorry to hear the bell ring as I did not want to leave for my next class, which was Gym. Luckily, Izzy and Gina both had Gym with me, so that always made it easier to get through.

After showing Alex where his next class was on the school map, I left with the girls. I am ashamed to say that when I got to the lunchroom door, I could not help but look back at Alex, to see if he was watching. I blushed, again, when I saw he was staring after me. I ducked my head, but not before I saw him smiling at my reaction.

On the way to the locker rooms, and while we were getting changed for Gym class, Izzy and Gina were grilling me about Alex.

“So where was he going to school before?” Gina questioned.

“Did he say where he came from?” Izzy asked.

“Must be somewhere with lots of rain, or maybe snow! Did you see how pale he is?” Gina exclaimed, wide-eyed.

“Pale, but gorgeous...” Izzy sighed dreamily.

“Canada,” I responded. “But I haven’t managed to get all the details yet. We’ve only had one class together so far!”

“Did you see how red Cassie went when he smiled at her?” Izzy teased.

“Yeah, and how she went all googly-eyed at him?” Gina teased also, laughing hysterically.

“Hey! Guys, please!” I begged. “Stop teasing!”

“Look, she’s doing a good impression of her blushing right now!” Izzy started giggling and, soon enough, I had joined in. Once our laughter died down they got to the serious questions.

“So, Cassie, you like him, huh?” Gina grilled me, a cheeky smile on her face.

“I... well, I guess, what’s not to like?” I answered, in a tone I hoped sounded casual.

It was obviously not casual enough.

“You *do* like him!” Gina laughed.

I was silent for a few moments, pulling my gym shirt over my head.

“Are you going to ask him out?” Izzy asked.

I shrugged.

“I don’t know. I mean, we’ve only just met. I don’t even know if he likes me.”

“Oh my gosh. She doesn’t see it!” Izzy said, while staring, stunned, at Gina.

“Are you crazy?” Gina said, just as stunned, as she looked at me.

“What?” I asked.

Izzy looked back at me, astonished.

“Did you not see the way he looks at you?”

“He’s got it bad!” Gina added, shaking her head in disbelief at my missing that point.

“Whatever, guys!” I said, shrugging it off. “I’ll just wait and see what happens.”

I turned to walk towards the gym, but heard Gina whisper to Izzy:

“Maybe she’s insane?”

I laughed to myself as I joined the rest of my classmates in the gym.

After almost an hour of torture – involving me trying not to be hit by flying balls and trying not to hit other students accidentally with flying balls – it was finally time to head to my next class.

I stopped outside my Chemistry class and said goodbye to Izzy and Gina. I would see them again after school when I dropped them home.

I walked into Chemistry and took my seat. I pulled out my textbook and folder, then started searching through my bag for my pen, which was mysteriously absent.

I heard a warm chuckle to my right and glanced up.

“Looking for something?”

Alex was holding my pen and his face was questioning, though his brilliant green eyes were smiling.

My mouth dropped open in surprise.

“How did you... where was...?” I stammered incoherently, once again taken aback by his stunning eyes and handsome face.

“It was here, with your folder.” He pointed towards my books on the table.

“Oh. Thanks,” I murmured, as I took the pen from him.

Our class was only small, so there were a few seats available, including the one next to me.

“Do you mind if I sit here?” Alex asked.

“Of course you can,” I assented.

Our teacher, Mr. Astin, called the class to order as Alex took his seat. He briefly introduced Alex to the class then went over the lesson. It seemed pretty straightforward and soon we were referring to our textbooks. I opened mine to the appropriate page and shifted it between us, so Alex could use it as well.

I leaned over to read the question at the top of the page closest to Alex. I heard, or rather felt, him pull back away from me. I sat back in my seat and watched him out of the corner of my eye, feeling confused. I wondered, for a moment, whether I smelt bad from Gym class. However, when I inhaled, all I could smell was the floral scent of the spray on deodorant I had applied after class. I glanced at him again, wondering what I had done to cause his reaction. I could see he was gripping his pen so hard, his knuckles were straining against skin and the pen was shaking in his hand.

“Alex, are you okay?” I whispered.

He did not answer me.

“Alex?”

“I’m fine,” he answered in a cool tone. He avoided looking at me.

I waited a few moments.

“Are you... sure?” I asked, concerned.

“Yes!” he whispered abruptly. “Just drop it okay?”

He briefly looked over at me. His eyes seemed to have changed color again – this time they were completely dark, verging on black – and the brilliance I had noticed before, was gone. I felt a chill pass down my spine. I shivered and gasped in the same moment.

He must have noticed my reaction, because he looked away from me and back down at the book in front of us. I swallowed the words I had been about to say, and stared down at my half-answered questions. My brain was making up a few unanswered questions of its own.

What had I done wrong? Why the sudden change in mood? Was I just imagining things? Was I going crazy?

I tried to put those questions out of my mind and to focus on the questions in front of me. I must not have done a great job of focusing, however. When Mr. Astin went over the answers, I had a few wrong – and these were simple refresher questions that I had aced in the previous year’s end of year exams. I was staring dumbly at the red pen crosses next to my incorrect answers, when I heard my name.

“Miss. Stone?” Mr. Astin called on me.

“Sorry, Sir?” I responded.

“Miss. Stone, are you feeling all right?” He looked concerned, and probably rightly so. This was the first time I had not been paying attention in the history of his Chemistry classes.

“Yes, Sir, I’m fine,” I replied, frowning slightly. “Could you repeat the question?”

He repeated the question for me and I gave him the answer he wanted. He went on talking to the class and I tried my best to pay attention. Through all of this, Alex sat as still as stone next to me.

When the bell rang, signaling the end of class, I was almost pleased to get out of there. I stuffed my folder and pen into my bag. Then, as I reached for my textbook, Alex closed it but kept his hand resting on top of it. I waited for a moment, but he did not move.

“Uh, Alex? Class is over and I need my textbook back.”

He glanced up at me, his eyes now somewhere between green and hazel.

“Look, Alex, I’m sorry if I did something to upset you. Just tell me what I did and…”

“Cassie.” He looked at me, almost sadly, as he shook his head at me. “You haven’t done anything wrong, trust me.”

I reached over and slid my book out from under his hand.

“Okay, so I was just imagining the arctic temperature between us, then?”

Alex stood up, collecting his bag from under his seat while he spoke.

“I’m sorry, Cassie. Just trust me when I say it’s me, not you.”

“Ha! Like I haven’t heard that before,” I muttered under my breath.

Alex looked sharply at me in response to my comment, then hesitantly smiled, apologetically. Despite myself, I could feel my doubts and hurt ebbing away. *How was he having this effect on me?*

“Cassie, honestly. I’ll explain it to you some day when we’re not rushing from one class to another.” He looked at his schedule. “Hmm… Spanish.”

I looked up, surprised.

“With who? Senora Bell?”

“Yes, actually. Room 124.” He looked up from his schedule to see me smiling at him.

“It looks like we will be spending our afternoons in most of the same classes,” I said happily.

He smiled back at me and walked with me to our next class. As we walked the short distance down the hall, I asked him a few questions that he seemed happy to answer.

“So, where were you living before moving to Castle Rock?”

“My family was living in Prince Rupert, British Columbia before moving here.”

“Do you like Castle Rock so far?”

He smiled and nodded.

“I really like the people here.”

“I really hope they are making you feel welcome.”

“Well, there was this one girl who shared her textbooks with me…”

Alex glanced at me out of the corner of his eye and I ducked my head, embarrassed.

We reached Spanish class and once again the introductions were done – mostly in Spanish – for the new student. Alex took the spare seat across the aisle from me and class began. Spanish passed in much the same way as the other classes, although Alex shared the textbook of the girl he was sitting next to, a pretty brunette named Natalie. She seemed quite keen to chat to him, but Senora Bell was not having that! Soon the class was quietly working on some Spanish writing exercises. We had to describe how our holidays went in alarming detail, so the lesson passed quite quickly, and was over before I knew it.

The final bell rang and I took my time closing my textbooks, keen to hear what Natalie had to say to Alex. Most of her questions were innocent enough; however, the way she stared at him, twisting her hair and playing with her necklace – classic flirting – left me with an uncomfortable ache in my chest and a bitter taste in my mouth. I was glad when one of her friends came to the door and called her away, leaving Alex and me alone at our desks.

He turned to me, a half-smile playing on his lips. I looked away, focusing on packing my books and pen into my bag. I recognized the pang of jealousy racing through my veins, but figured I had no right to feel that way, so I was fighting it.

“Cassie?” Alex sounded concerned.

“What?” I snapped, gruffer than I meant to be.

Alex was silent for a moment and I thought he had turned to collect his bag. I looked up from my books and was surprised to see him leaning back against his desk, one leg crossed over the other, watching me.

“What did I do?” he asked, concern clouding his eyes.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, the taste of jealousy still lingering on the back of my tongue. I swallowed, trying to force it away.

“You’re upset.”

“No, I’m not. Why would you say that?” I demanded, slamming my textbook into my bag a little harder than was necessary. *Get a grip, Cassie!*

Alex waited a few moments, quietly regarding me, his face serious. I swung my bag onto my shoulder.

“I think the lady doth protest too much,” he quietly stated.

I stared down at my desk, trying to get a grasp on my emotions. I closed my eyes and breathed in, counting to ten slowly in my head. I got as far as seven. Then a cool sensation under my chin caused me to open my eyes in surprise. Alex was

standing close to me, his index finger crooked under my chin, turning my face up to look at his.

I stopped breathing. I stopped counting. Okay, I admit it: I froze. My heart was doing all sorts of weird things in my chest, dancing about like a Mexican jumping bean.

My eyes stared into his, their green brilliance almost painful to look directly into. Then my gaze travelled down the shape of his cheek, his pale skin enticing. My thoughts wandered, as they had in the morning, wondering if his cheek was as cool as his hand was, resting under my chin. My eyes travelled to his lips, and my thoughts turned to how they would feel pressed against mine.

“Cassie, I would never intentionally hurt you. I hope you know that,” Alex’s voice broke into my thoughts.

My eyes flicked back up to his, reading honesty in them. I am positive I was not imagining his eyes, then, changing from deep forest-green to dark hazel, through to black, in an instant.

“Never!” He sounded angry, the word hissed between his teeth.

I pulled away from him, the spell broken. I gasped in a ragged breath and started breathing again. His eyes were dark, stormy and frightening. I backed away from him, a few steps. As I did, he spun away from me and slammed his hand down on the desk, hard enough to cause the desk to jump off the floor. I jumped too.

“Alex?” I whispered warily.

His hand was resting on the desk palm downwards. His other hand was clenched by his side, his jaw tense and his eyes closed. I noticed, then, the dark circles under his eyes, as if he had not been sleeping properly. He was so still, as if he were carved from stone; not breathing; the fierce look on his face slowly easing away into a calm, almost serene, look. I reached out my hand to touch him. Just as my fingers were about to brush his sleeve, he spoke.

“Cassie, don’t. Please,” he pleaded.

I jumped and drew my hand away from him.

“I’m sorry, Alex. I didn’t mean to upset you,” I explained quickly. “I was just jealous of Natalie flirting with you. I had no right to be. Please don’t be mad at me.”

“I’m not mad,” he said, a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth. “I’m just sorry I frightened you.” He was watching me, worriedly.

“I wasn’t frightened,” I said simply.

“You’re a terrible liar,” he said, his smile breaking through, dazzling me.

“Still friends?” I asked.

“There’s nothing I would like more,” he said, his voice relieved and his eyes shining in their full, green brilliance, again. “We’d better get out of here; your friends will be wondering where you are.”

We walked out, via my locker, to find Izzy, Gina and Tony waiting in the car park. Izzy took the keys from me and unlocked the car, while Gina said goodbye to Tony. I turned to Alex.

“One day you are going to have to explain your random mood swings to me, you know,” I murmured.

“I could say the same about you.” He chuckled, the sound warming me.

I raised my eyebrows, surprised.

“I thought I had explained myself,” I stated.

Alex was about to reply, when Gina interrupted.

“Hey, we’d better get moving, before my Mom wonders what’s happened to us.”

“Okay, Gina,” I replied, while snagging the keys from Izzy’s outstretched hand.

I turned to Alex. He smiled at me, leaned in close and whispered in my ear.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Cassandra Stone.”

I felt my breath catch in my throat and then, as he moved away, I managed to get out:

“I’ll be counting on that.”

Second Day – After School

All the way home, Gina and Izzy asked me questions about Alex which were, of course, questions I had not thought to ask him.

After running out of options on that topic, they started to talk about planning a camping trip a bit later in the summer, at one of the camping sites up near Mount St. Helens.

“It was Tony’s idea, actually,” Gina commented. “He thought it would be good for all of us to get together and spend a weekend getting to know each other’s friends better.”

“Ohhh, sounds like it’s getting serious between you two!” Izzy teased.

Gina did not reply, but her face flushed red and Izzy and I started giggling.

“Actually, that sounds like a good idea,” I commented, once the giggling had subsided. “Do you think we could invite Alex?”

“Tony said to ask him,” Gina said, nodding enthusiastically.

“I met Alex’s sister today, in Art class,” Izzy announced suddenly.

“What? Why didn’t you say so before?” I exclaimed. I was unaware that Alex had a sister. Mind you, I really did not know much about his family.

“Yeah, she seems really cool. And she’s really pretty! I’m sure you’d love her!” Izzy said.

“What’s her name?” Gina asked.

“Amaia! Doesn’t that sound so exotic?” Izzy enthused.

“I have to meet her,” I stated, “and I have to grill Alex as to why he didn’t tell me about her!”

Gina and Izzy laughed. Then Gina piped up.

“Sounds like it’s getting serious between you two!” she playfully teased.

I rolled my eyes at her as we pulled up into Izzy’s driveway. Izzy clambered out of the car and collected her bag from the back seat.

“I’ll get Mom to drop me at Gina’s tomorrow morning, on the way to work, okay, Cassie?”

“Sure thing, Izzy.”

Izzy strolled up to her porch, then turned and dramatically posed and waved at us as I pulled out of the driveway. Gina and I giggled and waved back, as we drove off.

After I dropped Gina to her house, I drove home and parked my car outside our garage. Mom was not home; she was still working at the store.

I ran inside and up to my room, to change into the store uniform. I had been helping Mom at work a couple of afternoons each week, ever since Dad had passed away a few years earlier. As I changed, I stared at his photo on my dresser.

“Oh, Dad, I wish you were here,” I murmured to the picture. “Finally a guy is paying attention to me and you aren’t here to get your shotgun out!”

I laughed to myself, imagining Dad was here and laughing with me. I picked up the photo, kissed it, then left my room and headed to the kitchen.

I grabbed an apple from the fruit basket on the bench and checked the answering machine. No one had called. I looked out the window and saw that Mom had left washing on the line. The clouds were looking very threatening, so I ran outside, pulled the clothes off the line and left them in the basket on the couch. Then I locked up and drove to the store.

* * * * *

I arrived at the Castle Rock Food Market a few minutes later. I entered through the staff entrance and found Mom in the Manager’s office.

“Hi, Mom!” I greeted her, walking behind the desk to kiss her cheek.

“Hello, sweetheart. How was your day?”

“It was very... interesting,” I said simply.

“Interesting?” she asked, her blue eyes flashing with curiosity. “How so?”

“Well...” I started, coyly.

“Cassie! Tell me what happened!” My mother tended to live vicariously through me. Since she was always so busy trying to keep our roof over our heads, she did not have much time for fun. At that moment, she was grinning, telling from my tone that something very interesting had happened, and she wanted the gossip.

“There’s a new family in town, apparently. And I met one of them today.”

She smiled at me, as if she already knew.

“You must be talking about the Graysons,” she stated.

I looked up, my mouth open in shock.

“How did you know?”

“Honey, you don’t run a supermarket as well as I do, without hearing things from the customers. Especially the older ones; they love to talk!” she said, laughing.

“Well, did the older customers tell you about the very good looking son who sits next to me in half of my classes?”

It was Mom’s turn to be shocked.

“Really? No, they never said much about the kids. They seemed more interested in the fact that the mother is a veterinarian who could look after their pet lap dogs and old cats.” She laughed. “What is this son’s name, if I may ask?”

I laughed, pretending for a few seconds that I was not going to tell her.

“His name is Alexander Grayson,” I finally stated.

“Alexander Grayson?” she asked. “I used to go to school with a boy called Alexander Grayson. I wonder if he is related.”

“I don’t know, maybe.” I shrugged. “Anyway, he apparently has a sister at school too. Her name is Amaia. She’s in Izzy’s Art class.”

“I hope you girls are being nice to them. It’s not easy starting at a new school where everyone else has been there since their first year,” Mom lectured.

“Mom! Relax! We are being nice; in fact, I shared my textbooks with Alex today, because he didn’t have his yet. And Izzy really seemed to like Amaia, and wants Gina and I to meet her. She thinks we will all get on really well.”

“That’s good, honey. Well, you’d better get to work; it’s looking busy out there.” Mom was looking out the window to the main store.

“Okay, Mom. See you later!”

* * * * *

I headed out to the checkouts and greeted Marjorie, who I usually worked with. She checked out and I bagged up the groceries.

“Hey, Marj!” I greeted her cheerfully.

“Hey, Cass!” She smiled as I joined her. “About time you showed up, we’re getting busy!”

I laughed and started bagging the groceries.

The next customer through the queue was my favorite customer, Mrs. Hutchinson.

“Good afternoon, girls!” she cheerily greeted us.

“Afternoon, Mrs. Hutchinson,” we greeted her in unison.

“Did you find everything okay, today?” I inquired.

“Yes, sweetheart, I did. But I noticed they have put the prices up on the dog food again!” she grumbled – good-naturedly, of course.

“Ahh, inflation!” I said, with a world-weary sigh. Marjorie giggled behind her hand and Mrs. Hutchinson smiled at me, in on our weekly joke.

“Cassie, could you help me get my groceries into my car? I don’t have Ray with me today, but he will be able to help me unload at home.” Ray, her son, often came shopping with her, but occasionally could not make it in.

“Sure thing, Mrs. Hutchinson!” I nodded, loading the last bag into the trolley while she paid. Then I wheeled the trolley, while she tottered along beside me, out to her car.

“So, did you hear about the new vet in town?” Mrs. Hutchinson asked me.

“Do you mean Dr. Grayson?” I asked.

“Yes, Dr. Grayson. I wonder if she will be nice to Puddles?”

Puddles was Mrs. Hutchinson’s old Persian cat. She was known to be pretty grumpy at the best of times, a trait that Mrs. Hutchinson put down to people being cruel. Puddles, however, was more than happy to yowl and scratch a friendly person just as quickly as a not so friendly person.

“I certainly hope so!” I said cheerfully.

I loaded the groceries into the back of Mrs. Hutchinson’s white Mini Cooper then waved to her as she pulled away.

I joined Marjorie at the counter again and the rest of the afternoon passed quite quickly, with plenty of customers coming through the checkout.

We stopped for our afternoon break and wandered to the staffroom for a quick cup of tea – or soda, in my case. I munched on the apple I had brought from home. Marjorie regaled me with stories from her brother, Rob, who was touring Europe and getting into a few interesting situations, from the sounds of things. We were still giggling when we returned to the checkouts and reopened our queue. While Marjorie reloaded her cash drawer, I grabbed some new bags from the customer service desk and returned to hang them up at our checkout.

“Keeping you busy, I see.”

I stopped in the middle of hanging the new bags, to glance up into now familiar green eyes.

“Alex...” I stammered, my face traitorously giving me away by reddening. *Why did I have to react to him like that?*

He smiled at me and I smiled back shyly. Marjorie was watching the two of us like it was the best entertainment she had seen all day. I dropped the bags I was holding and they scattered across the floor.

Alex looked away from me to the bags on the floor and, again, the spell was broken. I noticed a very beautiful girl, around my age, standing next to him. She was about my height, five foot three, her hair was jet black and formed into perfect ringlets, which were shoulder length. Her dark hair was in stark contrast to her pale skin. Her eyes were the same forest-green, and shone with the same brilliance, as Alex's. She stared at me and then her face broke into a radiant smile.

"You must be Cassie!" she exclaimed happily.

I nodded. *She was breathtaking!*

Alex turned to her and murmured something into her ear, so quietly, that if I had not seen his mouth moving I would not have realized he had spoken at all.

She gasped, then somehow the brilliance of her smile toned down and she looked away from me. If I did not know better, I would say she was embarrassed by her show of enthusiasm. I did not mind it at all; it was the most beautiful thing I think I had ever seen.

"Cassie, this is my sister, Amaia." Alex smiled fondly at her as he said this. Then his eyes and smile were back on me, full impact. I gasped but somehow managed to gather my wits about me. *Hey I was getting better at this!*

"Nice to meet you, Amaia," I said, smiling at her.

"It's a pleasure to meet you too, Cassie!" she enthused.

The customer in line behind them cleared his throat impatiently.

I crouched down, collected the scattered bags and hung them on the bag hooks. I glanced up, as I stood up, and saw that Amaia was paying for a few things – with a Gold *MasterCard!* Marjorie looked just as surprised as me, at seeing this. I reached for her items, to put them in a bag, but Alex stopped me.

"Here, let me," he said softly. He took a bag from the hook and placed the few items into it. I just stood there and let him.

When he finished, he looked at me and then slowly winked! I stared at him as he picked up the bag, then he and Amaia gracefully walked away.

"Earth to Cassie! Earth to Cassie!" Marjorie's voice broke into my stunned mind.

My head snapped back around to stare at her. She was grinning at me and pointing at the next customer's groceries in front of me.

“Oh my gosh! I’m so sorry!” I exclaimed, blushing yet again. I started loading groceries double-time into the bags. The customer who had been so impatient before, was now grinning at me and shaking his head knowingly.

I was mortified.

He left and the next few customers went through with no problems. Soon, there was a lull in the number of customers. Marjorie looked at her watch.

“Yay! Nearly home time!” she exclaimed. “Rob’s going to be calling me tonight from Germany, so I can’t wait to get home.”

“That’s awesome.” I grinned, excited for her.

“That’s not the only awesome thing I have come across today,” she commented, staring pointedly at me. “What was with those two extremely good looking people you were talking to before? Did you see they paid with a *Gold MasterCard*! I’ve never seen anyone through here under the age of forty, with one of those!”

“Those were the Grayson kids,” I said. “I met Alex today at school and I guess you could say we are friends.”

“They must be loaded,” Marjorie stated.

“I wouldn’t know. I mean, I barely know them.”

Marjorie giggled.

“I think Alex would like to know *you* better.”

I stared at her.

“Why does everyone keep saying that? He’s just being nice to me because I was nice to him.”

“That’s what *you* think.”

“Come on, Marjorie, what kind of a chance do I have? I’m just, you know, plain and boring. And he’s... amazing!” I sighed.

She smiled at me kindly.

“Cassie, you really have no idea, do you?”

I was about to ask her what she meant, but another customer arrived, so we got back to work. By the end of our shift, it was heading towards sunset. Mom came and collected me and we headed home.

We pulled up outside the house, Mom putting her car in the garage, mine waiting just outside. I unlocked the house and switched some lights on.

Mom started dinner, while I started my homework on the dining room table. I hurried through my Science and English homework, although it was hard to

concentrate when my mind kept whizzing back to what Mom had said earlier. I quickly grew impatient with my mind wandering. I decided to deal with my question right there and then.

I went to the bookcase in the living room and pulled out Mom's high school yearbooks.

"Hey, Mom?" I called out.

"Yes, sweetie?"

"What years did you go to school with your Alex Grayson?"

"Oh, I can't remember. I'm pretty sure he was there the year I graduated. He was a year or so below me though."

"Okay! Thanks!" I called back.

I pulled out her final two yearbooks and took them to the dining table. I started flicking through them, looking for any caption that mentioned his name. I turned to the student listings, with their photographs, and started to run my finger down the list by surname.

I saw his picture before I even read his name.

"Oh my gosh," I murmured, staring at the picture. Even though the photo was about thirty years old, there was no mistaking who I was looking at.

Alex. My friend Alex.

I stared at the picture, searching for any subtle differences to indicate that it was anyone else. But, despite being in black and white, there was absolutely no difference. The same dark hair, the same eyes, the same nose, the same square jaw and the same brilliant smile.

My stomach tied itself in knots. *This did not make any sense!*

I grabbed the other yearbook, determined to prove my eyes wrong. I flicked through it, straight to the photos. I did not even read the names; I just looked at each picture down the page until, yes, there he was again.

I jumped when Mom's hand landed on my shoulder.

"What are you looking at, sweetie?"

"Oh, just looking at pictures of your Alex Grayson," I said as casually as possible.

Mom leaned down next to me and looked at the pictures.

"Ohhh, these bring back memories. Yes, that's Alex there." She pointed at the picture. "He was such a good looking boy. Had the most amazing green eyes. I remember all the girls wanted to date him." She smiled nostalgically.

“What happened to him?” I asked.

“Oh, I’m not sure. I think he went off to college somewhere in the end, much like the rest of them.” She straightened up and started stacking my school work.

“He must be related to my Alex,” I commented. “They look nearly identical.”

Mom moved and stood behind me, running her hand over my hair.

“Well, you’d be surprised what good genes will do. Your grandmother thinks you look just like I did at your age.”

I laughed then, relieved. *Of course! That made sense.*

I ran my finger over the elder Alex’s picture.

“Your Alex had green eyes? So does mine.”

“What’s this ‘your Alex, my Alex’ business?” Mom joked. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

I blushed.

“No, of course not.”

“Honey, trust me. If Alex looks anything like the Alex I used to know, I wouldn’t blame you in the slightest if you had a crush on him.” She crouched down next to me and looked into my eyes. “I’ve been waiting with bated breath for you to come home telling me you’ve fallen in love with a boy. It worries me, you being so tied up in your studies and work.”

“Aww, Mom! Stop it!” I exclaimed, smiling sheepishly. “You’re embarrassing me.”

Mom smiled at me, then got up and went back to the kitchen.

“Can you set the table for me, love?” she called out.

“Sure!” I called back. I grabbed one of my folders and tucked a piece of paper in each of the yearbooks, where the photos of the elder Alex were. I added the yearbooks to my school book pile, carried them upstairs to my bedroom and placed them on my desk. Then, I hurried back downstairs to set the table for dinner.

* * * * *

After dinner, I helped Mom with the dishes. Then, as soon as I could, I rushed upstairs to my computer. I quickly scanned in the pages from Mom’s yearbooks, so I had a copy available to print. I returned the yearbooks to the bookcase downstairs then went back to my room, planning to do some searching online. But my phone was ringing when I got upstairs.

“Hello?” I picked up, seeing Gina’s number on my caller ID.

“Hey, Cass, it’s just me. Are you free the weekend after next?”

“Sure, I haven’t got anything planned. Why?”

“Oh, that’s when Tony wants to have the camping trip. He just wants to get an idea of numbers, so he can call up and book us in. We want to make the most of the summer weather while we have it!”

“I’m sure that will be fine,” I answered. “I just need to make sure Mom doesn’t need me for anything. I assume we’ll need to use her car?” Mom’s car was a station wagon, so would have more room than my little hatchback for camping equipment.

“I think we will, if that’s okay with her.”

“I’ll check with her and let you know tomorrow, okay?”

“That’d be great. Hey, do you think that Alex and Amaia will want to come along too?”

“I’m not sure. I guess the best thing to do would be to ask them. By the way, I met Amaia today at work.”

“Oh, really? What is she like? Is she as pretty as Izzy said?”

“Like it makes a difference, but yes, she’s stunning. Not that I noticed, because I was too busy staring at Alex...”

“Oh my gosh! Alex was there? Tell me you didn’t have your hair up in that ponytail.”

“No, I still had it down,” I sighed, smiling at Gina’s worrying.

“Oh, good! So tell me what he said, word for word!”

After a very long conversation with Gina, where we broke down every word and every gesture – including the wink – that Alex had directed at me, Gina finally let me off the phone. It was getting late and I knew I needed to get some sleep.

I pulled up the pictures I had scanned into the computer and printed a copy of both of them. I folded them up and went to place them in my bag, then changed my mind.

I climbed into bed, opened the pages up, and stared at the pictures that looked so much like my new friend.

“Who are you, Alex Grayson?” I asked myself, sleepily.

I fell asleep holding the pictures in my hand. I was still holding them when I awoke the next morning.

Strange Coincidences

The next few days flew by quickly. We girls were busy trying to arrange the camping trip. We decided that we would camp up near Mount St. Helens, at one of the camp sites that overlooked the Toutle River, but was close enough that we could make a day trip up the mountain.

The school year had started full swing. Every morning, when I woke up, my first thought was that I would get to see Alex again. I was trying to learn more about him, but so far he had been answering my questions in very general terms, which was slowly driving me crazy. I did not understand what he was hiding from me – if it was anything at all – and I did not understand why he was so vague in his answers to my questions.

I had managed to talk him into coming camping with us and he seemed pleased that I had also invited Amaia. I was determined to get to know both of them a lot better. I thought that perhaps, without all the other students around, I might be able to get them to open up and actually talk to me, rather than the rushed conversations between classes and the brief answers he had been giving me during our lunch breaks.

He still sat in a stony silence during Chemistry class, but he had insisted that he just did not like Chemistry, so I left him to it. If he wanted to sulk about a class he took, that was up to him. I just hoped he would stop letting it make him miserable.

Izzy had introduced Gina to Amaia the day after I met her at the market. I found her very interesting. She was usually quiet but, once you got her talking, it was amazing all the random facts that she knew. She often had us in fits of laughter at the cafeteria table with her impressions of famous people, and her running commentary on the state of life now compared with various time frames in the past. She seemed to love history, and listening to her was a pleasure. There was something about her, charisma perhaps, which drew people to her.

At the same time, however, I noticed that she never really talked much about herself. I tried to get some information from her about Alex, but she simply said:

“If he wants to tell you, he will.”

She then changed the subject. It was only after she walked away that I realized that I still had no answers. They really were quite secretive and my curiosity was getting the better of me.

The day before we were to leave for our camping trip, I was looking up information about Mount St. Helens to tell the Graysons. Suddenly I had an idea.

I opened my internet browser and typed “*Alexander Grayson*” into the search bar.

There were a number of hits, mostly relating to Facebook pages of people who obviously were not him. I rolled past these and continued looking, to see if anything stood out.

I clicked on a couple of links before I found something that made me stop dead.

An article popped up on the screen about an apartment fire in New York City. What caused me to pause was the picture of a young man comforting a couple of children, while firefighters were battling the blaze behind them. The man was kneeling on the ground, his hands tucking blankets around one of the children as he spoke to them, oblivious to the photographer taking the picture. He was covered in soot, but it was not enough to hide what he looked like. Not enough to hide the familiar dark hair and the shape of his eyes. His face, almost in profile, was the same face I often admired during my lunch breaks. His smile, as he spoke to the child, was so achingly familiar. The look on the child’s face as she gazed up at him was, I am sure, mirrored on mine every time he smiled at me. I read the caption below the picture.

“Alexander Grayson with two children he risked his life to rescue from the burning Mayfield Apartments.”

Then I read the date: *20 October 1975.*

I must have sat there, staring back and forth between the picture and the date, for a full twenty minutes before I moved again.

“How is that even possible?” I finally breathed.

Immediately, I was in full research mode.

I rolled through a few more articles. There was another mention of an Alexander Grayson; another news article.

“Brave Teen Saves Five from Bridge Horror!” screamed the headline.

I read the article, which mentioned how an eighteen year old had dived into a river in Minnesota, to rescue five people who had crashed their car off a bridge into

the river. There were no photos, but one of the survivors had described how their rescuer had single-handedly rescued all five occupants, diving repeatedly until he had them out of the freezing river. She described how she would “*never forget his brilliant green eyes and how beautiful his smile was when he realized I was alive.*” His name was only briefly mentioned in the article, but he had refused to comment. The article was dated *4 June 1961*.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” I said, quoting one of my favorite childhood books. I felt like I was a real-life Alice, slowly falling down a rabbit hole. Everything I read made sense on its own, but as part of the bigger picture it even made Wonderland seem normal.

I did more research and eventually found reports of a soldier, Private A. Grayson, who went missing during World War II then turned up, alive and well, two years later in a prisoner of war camp. Amazingly, he seemed fit and healthy when they found him, unlike some of his fellow prisoners. He was described as a six foot tall, brown-haired, green-eyed soldier, who had signed up as soon as he had turned eighteen. What surprised the witnesses was that most of the soldiers had aged dramatically due to stress and the conditions in the camp. However, Private Grayson still looked like he was eighteen years old when he was released.

A link on the page led me to a report of another soldier of similar description, by the same name, who had been a hero soldier during World War I, rescuing three of his fellow soldiers while under fire.

Either Alex is immortal, or has great genealogy and comes from a family of heroes, I thought to myself as I kept searching.

By the time I finished, at about 10.30 P.M., I had found a few other news stories from around America. Hardly any had photos, but witness descriptions were pretty accurate. In later articles, that did have photos, I could have sworn I was staring at my new friend, instead of someone who would now be either in their thirties, forties or fifties.

I printed the reports and crawled into bed. I would have to ask Alex about the weird coincidences at school the next day.

* * * * *

The next day I walked into English class, determined to speak with Alex about what I had found. Much to my disappointment, he did not show up. I was surprised by how disappointed I was.

By the time I got to lunch, I had lost my appetite and was very worried about where he was.

Gina greeted me in the lunchroom and saw the look on my face.

“Okay, Einstein, what’s up?” she asked.

“Not much,” I said casually, as I glanced around the crowded lunchroom.

“Who are you looking for...” she started to ask. It must have dawned on her.

“Oh, Alex is away is he?” she asked, a cheeky grin on her face. “And you’re worried?”

“I’m not worried. He can look after himself,” I defended myself.

Gina laughed quietly and then started teasing me again.

“So, you’ve got it bad too huh?”

I blushed, in spite of myself, then glared at her.

“No!” I argued.

“Yes, you’ve got it so bad! You’re like a lost puppy without him here,” she teased.

Izzy sat down next to her.

“Hey, Gina. Hey, Cassie.”

“Hi, Izzy,” I greeted her absent-mindedly, my eyes still searching the faces around the room.

“Ignore Cassie,” Gina explained. “She’s lost her *boyfriend* and doesn’t know what to do with herself.”

“He’s not my boyfriend!” I exclaimed, laughing a bit at how ridiculous I was being.

“Oh, he’s taken the day off to get some camping equipment together for this weekend,” Izzy said suddenly. I stared at her. “Amaia told me yesterday that they were going to have the day off today,” Izzy explained.

I sat, quietly absorbing this information. He had taken the day off, but did not tell me. I felt hurt, more hurt than I probably had a right to.

He doesn’t have to explain himself to you, I told myself. He’s allowed to do what he wants, no need to get so worked up! Despite my pep-talking, I felt a familiar pricking sensation at the back of my eyelids and my stomach was tying itself into knots.

“I’m not hungry,” I said suddenly, as I pushed away from the table.

Izzy and Gina stared after me as I grabbed my bag and rushed to the door. I got to the courtyard and sat against the wall, under the windows, so none of the students

inside the lunchroom could see me. I hugged my knees to my chest and lay my forehead on my arms.

"I'm not going to cry. I'm *not* going to cry!" I recited to myself, an old habit I had developed while surviving being bullied in my earlier school years.

I knew I was being unreasonable, but it hurt to think that I was getting so excited about seeing Alex, and he did not know, or even care, that I worried about him, or that I wanted to see him. Disappointed tears filled my eyes and I blinked them away, determined that I would not give in to the pain.

I felt someone sit down beside me. I did not look up.

"Cassie?" Izzy's soft voice whispered. "Are you okay?"

"No," I mumbled into my arms.

"Can I help? Can I do anything to make you feel better?" she asked.

"No, not unless you have a magic cure for a broken heart," I muttered under my breath.

"Oh, hon," she murmured as she put her arm around my shoulders, hugging me. "It's going to be okay."

I sighed, the urge to burst into tears threatening to take over. I cleared my head, counted to ten then counted to ten again. Then I lifted my head up and looked over to Izzy. She was watching me, worriedly.

"I'm okay. I'm being unreasonable," I muttered, more to myself than to her.

She half-smiled at me and tilted her head to the side.

"There's nothing more unreasonable than matters of the heart," she said quietly, shrugging. "Nothing more painful, or more beautiful."

"It doesn't feel beautiful right now," I grumbled darkly, glaring across the car park.

"Gina is only teasing, you know," she murmured, "but she has a way of hitting the truth with that teasing way of hers. How far off is she?"

I sighed, my eyes fixed on the bumper of the nearest car.

"There's nothing going on between Alex and me. We're just friends – if you can even call it that," I admitted.

"But you want more?"

"I just want him to talk to me. I just want to get to know him," I complained. "But right now, I just wish I didn't care so much."

"It's that bad, huh?" she asked, a sad sort of smile on her face.

“I’m just disappointed, that’s all. I was really hoping to talk to him today.” I sighed again.

“Well, I know for a fact that he is coming camping with us. He would probably be here today if he wasn’t.” She smiled encouragingly at me.

I slowly nodded. She was making sense, of course.

“Aww, Izzy! You’re pretty good at hitting the truth on the head, yourself.” I forced myself to smile, tilting my head back against the brick wall behind me.

“I know! And that’s why you love me!” she giggled.

“We sure do, Izzy. We sure do,” I agreed.

“C’mon, Einstein, let’s get to class,” she said, standing and offering me her hand. I grabbed it and she hauled me to my feet.

As we went back into the lunchroom, I murmured gratefully:

“Thanks, Izzy.”

I was not sure that she heard me, until she turned back and gave me an impulsive hug, before picking up her bag.

Gina and Tony looked up at us, curiously, but seeing I was smiling again, Gina just shrugged and grabbed her bag, too. Then we headed to our afternoon classes.

Camping

After school, Gina and Izzy came over to my house with their camping gear in tow. We loaded up Mom's station wagon and I headed back inside to say goodbye to Mom. She checked we had everything we needed, before pulling me into a hug.

"Take care, sweetie, and make sure you have fun!"

"I will, Mom. Don't worry. I've got my friends with me. We'll be fine."

"Okay. I love you, hon," she said, kissing my cheek.

"Love you too, Mom. I'll call you when we get there, okay?"

She nodded and hugged me again.

Suddenly there was a blast of horns from outside. The others must have arrived. Gina and Izzy ran outside to greet them and, after extracting myself from Mom's arms, I grabbed my backpack from the sofa and ran out to join them, waving to Mom as I closed the door behind me.

There were two cars outside my house that I did not recognize. One of them, a Jeep, was parked in the driveway behind Mom's station wagon. It had a couple of Tony's friends in it. Tony was introducing Gina and Izzy to his friends. The other, a white sedan, was parked out on the road. As I walked across the porch, I saw the sedan's door open and Alex slid out of the car, clad in black jeans and a grey hooded sweatshirt. He closed the door behind him and leaned casually against it, looking towards the house. Amaia climbed out of the passenger seat, looking shy. Izzy noticed her. She ran over, grabbed Amaia's hand and pulled her back to meet Tony and his friends.

Meanwhile, Alex had noticed me standing on the porch. His face lit up, his good looks momentarily taking my breath away. I wondered, at that moment, whether I would ever be able to see him smile without my breath catching in my throat and my knees going weak.

Gracefully he walked, almost glided, across the lawn to the bottom of the porch stairs. I smiled shyly at him, my heart beating a mile a minute, as usual.

"Hello, fair lady," he said softly, using his nickname for me.

"Hi," I murmured, blushing.

“Camping, huh?” he said, raising an eyebrow at me and chuckling softly.

“Yeah, well, I just hope my tent stays up. Otherwise, I might be getting awfully close to nature and the night sky and all that,” I giggled, suddenly feeling at ease.

Alex moved smoothly up the stairs to join me on the porch. He glanced at my backpack, which I had let drop from my shoulder to the porch. Then his eyes wandered over me and he smiled.

“What?” I asked, looking up shyly into his eyes.

“You look really nice.” He smiled again, disarmingly.

I looked down at my normal jeans and tee-shirt combination.

“In these old things?” I asked, half-jokingly. I shook my head, not believing what he was saying. *Was he blind?* Given my lack of experience in putting up tents – or camping in general, for that matter – I had dressed in clothes that I did not mind getting dirty. The jeans were well loved, with a few small tears around the hems and one knee patched. The shirt was an old favorite of mine that had honestly seen better days. I had worn some makeup, knowing that I was going to be seeing Alex, and had packed some nicer clothes for the weekend. But, at that moment, I certainly did not feel pretty.

He smiled at me and picked up my bag, while I stood there, taken aback. He glided back down the stairs and across to the station wagon, where he loaded my bag into the back. Gina ran up to me, grabbed me by my arm and pulled me down to meet Tony’s friends.

Matthew and Jeremy were both jock types. Matthew was about Tony’s height, with dark hair that was slightly shaggy and an olive complexion. His chocolate-brown eyes seemed to be very happy and he seemed like a lot of fun. Jeremy was a bit taller and was slightly more muscular, his white shirt showing off his dark skin, his black hair cropped short and his dark eyes shining cheekily. I was sure that the pair of them would probably get into all sorts of mischief, if left alone for too long. Alex joined us and, once we had all been introduced, we piled into the vehicles and set off. We headed out of town and along the Spirit Lake Highway, my car leading the way, followed by Tony’s Jeep, then Alex’s sedan.

Soon we were driving through the forest lining the highway, heading east out of Castle Rock towards Silver Lake. Gina and Izzy were busy chatting about their plans for the weekend. I turned the radio on and we started singing along to some popular songs.

A few minutes later we arrived at Silver Lake. We pulled over briefly, near a small, wooden Bigfoot statue, to take some pictures. This got a few laughs out of Matthew, Jeremy and Tony. They posed, firstly pretending they were being chased by, and then pretending they were beating up, the Bigfoot. Alex stood near me, laughing at their antics. Amaia stood on his other side, chatting to Gina and Izzy about the history of Bigfoot myth.

I was watching the heavy cloud cover, which was obscuring most of the mountain vista ahead of us.

“I must say I’m a bit disappointed,” I commented to Alex and Amaia. “Mount St. Helens is usually an awesome sight if you get a clear day.”

“Ah well,” said Amaia, “plenty of time to see her yet!”

“I hope it clears up this weekend, so you can see her and get a few good pictures,” I enthused.

Amaia and Alex just looked at each other, then away, again, towards the base of the mountain. I had the feeling I was missing something, but decided that if Alex wanted to tell me, he would.

After the guys had finished messing around, we clambered back into our cars and headed off again. Soon we were cruising past Silver Lake itself. We could see the mountains on the other side – a stunning vista even with the cloud cover.

We eventually lost track of the mountains and lake, as the highway snaked back into the forest. We drove past the St. Helens Visitor Centre and the Seaquest State Park. The forest occasionally gave way to brief views of Silver Lake as we travelled along. I found the turning for the Silver Lake lookout and turned up the road, leading our friends towards it. Once we reached it, we could see the lake clearly and also got a great view of the cloud covered mountains.

“Wow, Cassie, this is really something!” Alex commented as he took in the view. Amaia had her camera out, taking pictures. She turned to us.

“Can I take a picture of you two?” she asked excitedly.

Alex looked at me, seeking my permission. I nodded and he hesitated for a moment, before smiling at his sister and placing his arm around my shoulder. I made a cheesy peace sign and Amaia took the picture. She turned to take a picture of something else, but Alex held me in place for a few more moments, his arm around my shoulder making me feel surprisingly safe.

I turned my face up to speak to him, at the same time as he looked down to speak to me. We both froze. I am not sure what he was thinking, but my brain went into overdrive.

His face, his eyes and his lips were all so close to mine. My eyes moved somehow from his stunning eyes, to his lips. My lips parted, drawing in a breath. I was tempted to kiss him, wondering what he would do if I did. But he suddenly dropped his arm from around me and stepped away.

Perhaps I had imagined it. Perhaps I was crazy to be thinking about him like that. I stared after him as he spoke to his sister and they returned to their car. Izzy spoke up from behind me.

“Hey, Cass, we’d better get moving if we want to set up camp before it gets too dark.”

“Hmm?” I turned to face her, realizing she was speaking to me.

She raised her eyebrows at me, gave me a knowing smile, then looked towards Alex’s car.

I shakily smiled back, then took a deep breath and turned back to my car. I led our group back to the highway and we continued on our journey.

Gina turned the music up on the radio and started singing along. Izzy sat contemplatively in the back seat, staring out the window. I drove, trying to focus on the road rather than the issues fighting for attention in my head. However, I was not having much luck.

Why on earth would he want to kiss me? Why on earth was he even trying to be my friend? It was pointless to hope that he would ever feel anything for me. Yet I was amazed at how safe I felt for those few moments that he had his arm around me. Was I stupid or was I stupid?

He can’t feel the same way about you Cassie, I told myself. No one does. Boys just ignore you. Boys go for girls like Gina, like Amaia – pretty, no, beautiful girls with way more to offer than what you have.

My train of thought was interrupted by a song playing on the radio, one that had been running through my head a lot lately. *Bruno Mars – Grenade*. I started singing along with it.

*“I would catch a grenade for ya
Throw my hand on a blade for ya*

*I'd jump in front of a train for ya
You know I'd do anything for ya..."*

Izzy looked up then, watching me in the rear view mirror.

*"I would go through all this pain
Take a bullet straight through my brain
Yes I would die for you, baby
But you won't do the same..."*

She frowned, her face concerned. She was always so perceptive. Perhaps she knew what I was thinking. I forced a smile onto my face and tried to pretend I was happy and having fun, even though I felt like I had been punched in the gut and my heart was aching.

She watched me for a moment longer then looked away, a thoughtful expression on her face.

* * * * *

Soon, we left Silver Lake behind and entered the small township of Toutle, named after the river that ran down from Mount St. Helens to Castle Rock. We jeered at the local high school – one of our rivals – and then laughed, seeing the guys in the car behind us doing the same.

"I love school spirit!" Gina giggled.

"Me too!" I agreed.

"Go Rockets!" Izzy chimed from the back seat.

Gina and I burst out laughing.

Soon enough we were through Toutle and had crossed the river. The road followed the river for a few miles, as we slowly climbed up into the mountains. Leaving the radio quietly playing in the background, Gina started questioning me.

"So, Cassie, what's the deal with you and Alex?"

I rolled my eyes.

"There is no deal with me and Alex," I sighed, shaking my head.

Gina stared at me in disbelief.

"Are you serious? What was all that back at Silver Lake, then?"

"All what?"

“Him putting his arm around you. I could have sworn there was electricity in the air between you. I could feel it from ten feet away.”

“We were just taking a photo.”

Gina sighed. After a moment, she spoke again.

“Cassie, when are you going to admit that you have feelings for him? It’s so obvious!”

I gripped the steering wheel, determined to not let my frustration take us off the road.

“I guess it’s not *that* obvious. He doesn’t have a clue. And even if I do have feelings for him, what can I do? He’s way out of my league!”

Gina raised her hands in a sign of surrender.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to upset you. I was only saying...”

I sighed.

“No, Gina, I’m sorry. It’s not your fault I’m so frustrated with what’s going on. I’ve just never been in this situation. I don’t know what to do.”

She looked over at me with a cheeky glint in her eyes.

“I could always drop some hints around him?” she suggested.

I did not answer her, knowing she was only teasing me. I just laughed and shook my head.

“Well, maybe something will happen this weekend?” Izzy chimed in from the back seat.

“I highly doubt it...” I started.

“You never know,” Gina remarked. “Just don’t give up on him, okay?”

“I won’t – just yet!” I joked.

“Good,” she stated, “because to be honest with you, Cassie, I have never seen you smile as much as you do around him, and I’ve never seen you so... well... crazy over a guy. Ever.”

I felt my cheeks coloring and pointedly ignored her comment.

She sighed. Then, realizing she was getting nowhere with me, she turned the radio back up.

A couple of minutes later we reached Kid Valley, the home of Bigfoot. I pulled up at the North Fork Survivor’s Gift Shop and Tony and Alex’s cars pulled in beside mine. We all clambered out of the cars – or rather, we clambered, while Alex and

Amaia slid out gracefully – and wandered around the site, checking out the buried A-Frame house and the massive, twenty-eight foot tall Bigfoot statue.

Amaia, Gina, Izzy, Jeremy, Matthew and Tony all crowded around the base of the statue. I stepped back and pulled my camera out to take a picture of them. I snapped a couple of pictures and then turned slightly, catching Alex in the display screen of the camera. He was standing a few feet away, staring up at the Bigfoot statue, looking thoughtful. I quickly snapped a picture of him.

Amaia wandered over to me.

“Hey, Cassie, do you want me to take a picture of you by the statue?”

“Sure.” I shrugged, handing my camera over to her. I headed over to the statue. Gina and Izzy grabbed me and we started pulling random, silly poses. I could have sworn that Bigfoot was getting in on the act too, his cheeky grin adding to the comedy of our posing.

I glanced over at Alex, who was standing next to Amaia. He was smiling, clearly enjoying our acting up. He spoke to Amaia. She nodded then took a couple more pictures, while Alex joined the other guys who were looking at the buried A-Frame.

It had been a newly built house when Mount St. Helens erupted in the 1980s. A river of mud flowed through the area and filled the house with about two-hundred tons of silt, mud, ash and water. The mud had also raised the ground level, making the house roof appear to protrude from the ground. It was a bizarre sight.

We ran out of ideas to make Bigfoot grin, so we joined the boys by the A-Frame and checked out the damage to the building caused by the mudflows. It was amazingly intact; however the lower level was filled with water so we could not go inside and look around. We strolled around outside and took a few more photos. We also visited the gift shop, giggling at the Bigfoot paraphernalia. A couple of the guys bought some Bigfoot tee-shirts, while we tried on some hats and examined the massive Bigfoot sighting map.

Soon we were on the road again, following the Toutle River, the road winding along the riverbank. We crossed over the river, heading deeper into the valleys and hills leading up to the mountain. I knew we were not far from our destination. Sure enough, a few minutes later we arrived at the campground.

It was about 5 P.M. when we pulled up. Tony ran into the main office to let the owners know we had arrived. A couple of minutes later, he returned with directions to our campsite. Tony pulled away first and I followed, with Alex’s car bringing up

the rear. Tony led us to one of the campsites, where we parked the cars. Once I had called Mom to let her know we had arrived, we started putting up the tents. I was glad I had dressed down, when my tent fell down on top of me and I ended up crawling out of the canvas.

I looked up, as I clambered out, to find Alex crouched by my fallen tent. He looked like he was trying not to laugh, as he offered me his hand and helped me to my feet. The cool touch of his hand in the darkening day sent chills up my arm and I shivered. He quickly withdrew his hand, but his eyes were still on me. I looked away from him, before the intensity of his stare made my heart skip beats and had me tripping over my own feet. Instead, I glanced over to where Amaia was hammering in a final tent peg, her and Alex's tents standing upright next to mine. I frowned, annoyed at my lack of camping skills.

Gina and Izzy had managed to raise another tent each, by themselves, along the back of the campsite which was on the other side of my tent. I understood that the dome-style tents we were putting up could be raised by a single person – a single, skilled person. The boys were masterfully trying to raise a two room monstrosity across the site from where ours were situated. I grimaced, imagining the mess I would make with that, then turned back to face my crumpled mess on the ground.

“It shouldn't be that difficult!” I grumped, mostly at myself.

“Let me help,” Alex ventured gently.

I sighed, frustrated.

“I'm hopeless. I can't even put up a simple tent,” I grumbled. Then I smiled, trying to make a joke of it.

Alex stood next to me and stared down at the canvas on the ground.

“Well, there's only one thing for it. I'll have to show you what to do.”

I looked up at him gratefully.

“I'm sorry I'm such a grump. I just feel a little stupid right now, which is unusual for me.”

He smiled brightly at me as he bent down and picked up one of the tent poles.

About ten minutes later the tent was up, mostly without my hindering assistance. Gina and Izzy applauded me – much to my disgust – when the final tent peg and rope were in place.

I grabbed my sleeping bag and stretcher bed, then clambered into the tent, carefully avoiding the various ropes and flaps that threatened to trip or catch me. I sat in the center of the tent, mentally chastising myself, my face burning.

He's going to think you are a complete idiot now! Great with the books, useless at everything else. You can't even put up a simple tent without help! I glared at the stretcher bed, still in its bag, then shook my head. *Should I even bother?*

So far my camping trip was off to a great start.

I heard shouts of laughter from across the site, where the boys had probably just finished putting up their monstrous tent. I could hear Gina and Izzy as well, chattering away in their tents, probably setting up their beds. I wondered how they would fare without their full length mirrors in the morning. I also wondered how I would get through the weekend without embarrassing myself further.

I decided to take a look around, so I escaped the tent – miraculously without pulling it down around me – and wandered away to check out the bathroom facilities.

While I walked, I thought about Alex and what had happened at Silver Lake. I knew that my frustration did not really stem from the camping, or the tent, or my stretcher bed. It was not even Alex who I was frustrated at. It was me. My emotions were wreaking havoc and I had no idea how to progress through to a point where I was no longer confused.

Was I kidding myself, imagining that there could ever be anything more between us than friendship? He was so mysterious and I had no idea how to get him to open up to me – if he even wanted to. I thought back to how it felt when he had his arm around me for that brief moment. *Was I reading more into that, and into the looks he gave me, than what was really there? Would this weekend be enough for me to figure it out? Or was I destined to go back to school next week with nothing any clearer in my mind?*

I reached the bathroom block and looked around. *Not bad; perhaps camping would not be so terrible after all.* I splashed some water on my face at the sink, determined to head back to the tents in a better mood. I looked up into the mirror above the sink and jumped, seeing Amaia standing behind me. She had come in so quietly, I had not heard her.

“Amaia, you scared me!” I laughed.

“Sorry, Cassie.” She smiled serenely. “I didn’t mean to frighten you. I saw you wander away, looking a bit upset. I just wanted to check you were okay.” She watched me, her head tilted to one side, her eyes bright.

I sighed and nodded.

“Yeah, I’m okay. Just having a nervous moment, I guess. I’m not used to all this outdoorsy camping stuff.”

Amaia laughed; it was a beautiful, musical sound, sweet and enticing to my ears.

“Don’t worry. I never thought I’d like camping myself, but the more you do it, the easier it gets. Trust me!” she said happily.

Suddenly I felt that I could trust her. I turned to face her.

“Amaia, can I ask you something?”

She looked surprised, but nodded.

“Sure.”

“Have you ever been so totally confused about someone, that you don’t even know which way is up with them?”

She frowned, thinking. Even her frown was beautiful.

“I think so, but it was a long time ago. It’s hard to feel like that when people just open up to you, you know. I’ve always found it easy to understand people.” She shrugged apologetically.

“What I wouldn’t give to have what you have,” I murmured sadly.

“Hey, there are many who would love to be in your shoes. I’m one of them. There isn’t really any mystery to human nature for me.”

We both fell silent for a few moments, thinking.

“We’d better get back to the site,” I murmured, afraid that if I kept talking, she would figure out it was her brother I was worried about.

She smiled at me again; the beauty of her eyes and smile momentarily stunning me. Then she turned to leave and the spell was broken.

Wow those Graysons have amazing eyes, I thought to myself, as I walked quickly to keep up with her long, gliding stride.

When we got back to the campsite, I saw that the others had been busy. They had set up a couple of fold out tables and some beach chairs. Alex was sitting in one of them, his back to us. The other girls were with Tony, trying to work out how to adjust the awning on the big tent. Matthew and Jeremy were tossing a football back

and forth between them. As we approached, Alex stood up and turned to face us, as if he had heard one of us greet him, though neither of us said anything.

"I found her," Amaia murmured quietly, her voice so low I barely heard it. She and her brother exchanged a glance and then he turned to me, looking worried.

"Don't worry, I'm fine," I said, before he could ask.

I smiled at him briefly. Then I decided I had better get my bed in order, before it got too dark to see. The sun was starting to set behind the cloud cover, the evening air was cooling and the light was fading.

I opened the tent flap, climbed inside and spotted my stretcher bed, still in its bag. I opened the top and tipped the contents out on my tent floor. The metallic clang of the legs hitting each other on the ground made me grimace. *Everyone nearby probably heard that!* I sighed, then picked up a couple of the framework pieces and started figuring out how they went together. It was difficult in the low light inside the tent.

I looked up as the tent zipper opened and the flap was pulled back, revealing a light.

"Need a hand?" said a warm, familiar voice.

I smiled, in spite of my frustration, as Alex somehow folded his six foot frame into the smaller space of the tent. The light was coming from a torch he held in his hands. He attached it to the loop at the top of the dome, so it shone down on the stretcher I was trying to assemble. He sat cross-legged in front of me, surveying the mess of poles and fabric. I smiled at him, embarrassed.

"I thought this would be easier to put together than the tent," I commented wryly, "but I guess I was wrong."

The corners of his mouth turned up, as he wordlessly picked up a couple of pieces and started to assemble the bed for me. I passed him pieces as he asked for them and soon we had the frame together. He clipped the canvas sheet, which formed the bed's mattress, to the frame. I smiled gratefully at him, as he pulled out my sleeping bag and laid it out on top of the stretcher.

"Thanks," I said.

"You're welcome," he murmured. "We couldn't have you sleeping on the ground, now, could we?"

"Please don't tell the others..." I started, but he held his hand up to silence me.

“It’s our little secret, don’t worry.” He stood up, bending over in the small space as he turned to leave. “Hey, we’re all going to the main dining room for dinner. Then there is a campfire, where we can hear some Bigfoot and volcano stories, later on. Coming?” he asked. His eyes shone in the torchlight, smiling warmly at me.

“Absolutely.” I nodded, grabbed my jacket out of my bag and followed him out of the tent.

The sun had set and it was dark outside. Alex had the torch in his hand and, when we came out of the tent, I saw Amaia was waiting for us. She stood up from the table and said that the others had gone on ahead.

She led the way, strolling confidently in the dark. I followed, being careful not to trip over my own feet as I walked next to Alex, who held the torch.

A cool breeze had sprung up and I shivered involuntarily as it passed over my skin. I started to unfold my jacket to put it on, when Alex turned and took it from my hands. He handed Amaia the torch, held the jacket up so I could slide my arms into the sleeves, then straightened the collar. I buttoned it up and looked up him. He reached up and pushed a stray strand of hair, which had come loose from my ponytail, back behind my ear.

“Perfect,” he said softly, the touch of his hand on my cheek cool, yet gentle.

I closed my eyes for a moment, enjoying the sensation. His hand drifted from my cheek down to my neck, sending a shiver down my spine. The side of his hand rested on my shoulder, his index finger resting just beneath my ear. My heart was pounding and I was sure he would be able to feel my pulse racing. I felt him step closer to me and I breathed in, his scent an indescribable aroma, yet so tempting at the same time. I briefly wondered what cologne he used.

“Perfect,” he muttered again, his voice suddenly low, guttural and dangerous.

I opened my eyes, staring warily into his. They glittered in the dark; I could not make out their color. I heard him inhale a deep, ragged breath. Suddenly Amaia was by our side. I heard her say his name, as she reached out, placed her hand on his arm and pulled his hand away from me.

“We need to get going,” she murmured, as if it were an excuse. She glanced at me briefly, looking worried, then back at her brother.

He suddenly stepped back, as if he had been pushed. Then he turned and stalked quickly, and silently, away.

I stared after him then over to Amaia, questions in my head.

“Don’t worry about him,” she said, laughing lightly. She rolled her eyes. “Males!” she murmured as she grabbed my arm and pulled me along beside her.

Before I knew it, we were standing outside the dining room. Alex was waiting there in the dark, leaning up against the wall, his hands shoved into his jeans pockets. He glanced up at our approach, rather warily I thought. Amaia led me past him into the dining room, but he quickly caught up.

“Hey, Cassie,” he said, “about before...”

“Don’t worry about it,” I quickly replied.

Was he worried he had upset me? He had not. In fact, far from it. The worst part was that I was wondering how far he would go if he was not interrupted – a thought that did not worry me; rather, I welcomed it. *Perhaps his feelings ran deeper than I had given him credit for?* My heart jumped at the thought.

Over dinner I found myself wondering, again, how his lips would feel against mine. *Would they be warm? Cool? Soft?*

I suddenly felt a poke at my arm. I looked up from my plate to Gina’s questioning eyes.

“Sorry?” I asked.

“Hey, Einstein, welcome back to Earth!” she said, with a laugh.

I blushed, embarrassed, as most of the eyes around the table were now on me – except Alex’s; he was staring out one of the windows, the plate in front of him untouched.

“Anyway,” Gina continued, “I was asking if you were going to come to the campfire. Tony’s going to teach us how to make s’mores – the campfire version!” she giggled.

“Sure,” I agreed, “but wouldn’t campfire s’mores be the same as fireplace s’mores?” I glanced at Tony, questioningly.

He briefly smiled at me before putting on a shocked face.

“How could you say that, Cassie? My campfire s’mores are legendary. Nothing like your standard fireplace s’mores! Pffftt.”

I laughed as he pulled a face to show he was extremely disappointed in me. Then he started a discussion outlining the extreme differences between the two types.

I glanced over at Amaia. Her eyes were shining, as if this was the most fun she had had in a long time. Alex was still staring out the window, as if indifferent to what

was happening around him. I frowned. *Did he not want to be here?* The cool, almost angry look on his face reminded me of Chemistry class. I was about to open my mouth to try to speak to him, when Amaia spoke up.

“Hey, Cassie, do you think they’ll tell ghost stories?”

My eyes flicked away from Alex and back to Amaia. She was smiling at me. I could not help feeling a little excited on her behalf.

“I don’t know. More likely to be Bigfoot stories around here,” I replied with a laugh.

“Cool!” she enthused.

* * * * *

After dinner, we headed out to the campfire that the owners had set up. There was a fire pit surrounded by seating; plenty of room for our little group, plus some tourist groups that were in the area and the owners of the camp, John and Debbie.

Tony and Matthew were carrying some bags and, as soon as we were seated, they pulled out a bunch of ingredients for their “Legendary S’mores”. I watched, fascinated, as they put their campfire desserts together. They had a couple of extra ingredients that I had never considered before, but when they handed me my first “toasted L.S.” – as Jeremy had nicknamed them – I had to say that it was better than any other I had tasted.

“See, told you so!” Tony gloated, when I admitted the same to him.

I laughed and took another bite. I was surprised to see that Amaia and Alex both declined to eat them.

“They’re really good! Honestly!” Izzy enticed them.

“I’m so full from dinner, I’m going to pop!” Amaia admitted.

Alex gave a similar excuse, but I was not convinced. I had not seen either of them eat anything at dinner. Amaia seemed to realize that I had been watching them. She stared at me, her eyes pleading with me not to say anything. I felt that same feeling of trust pass between us that I had experienced in the bathroom, so I just nodded slightly at her and did not say anything.

John started telling us stories about the history of the camp, the history of Mount St. Helens, and also threw in a few good “eyewitness accounts” of seeing Bigfoot in the area.

We were laughing and enjoying ourselves, when I noticed Amaia staring up at the sky. I looked up and saw, much to my surprise, a few shooting stars flying across

the sky, well beneath the cloud cover, leaving trails of fire behind them. My mouth dropped open in astonishment. I had seen the occasional shooting star in the past, but not a whole meteor shower – and definitely not this close!

Gina heard me gasp. Soon she and some of the others were staring at the sky, too. We watched as the meteors passed overhead, silently, but larger than we ever expected. I saw one particularly large piece fly directly towards the area of the volcano, disappearing beyond the horizon. A few seconds later we felt a jolt, much like an earthquake, but without the continuing rumble after it. We all looked at each other in surprise. We saw a few of the smaller meteors also disappear beyond the horizon, but they did not have the same impact as the larger rock – that is, if they even landed.

Suddenly all of the campers were talking at once.

“Oh my goodness, what on earth was that?” I heard one camper cry out.

“Was that a meteor shower?”

“What on earth just happened?”

“Was that the volcano or an earthquake?”

Tony and Matthew started making plans to drive up to the summit of Mount St. Helens the next day, to see if they could spot anything.

In the confusion of people moving around, chatting and questioning, it took me a few minutes to realize that Amaia and Alex had left the campfire.

“Did you see where Alex went?” I asked Izzy.

“No. When did they leave?”

“I’m not sure. They were here when the meteors came over. I don’t know when they left.”

“Perhaps they went meteor hunting?” she said, giggling softly.

I looked at her dubiously, then started quietly thinking. Alex had been acting weird all evening, like his mind was elsewhere. Mind you, he had a tendency to lapse into sullen silences for anything from a few minutes to an hour or so, then just as quickly be warm and friendly again, like nothing had happened.

Izzy and Gina suggested to the boys that they should get some sleep, before setting out on their road trip the next day. We gathered up our things and, after saying goodnight to the other campers, we wandered back to our site.

Alex and Amaia were not there either.

We sat around outside for another hour or so. The boys planned out their search with the help of a map I had found in Mom's glove box. Gina and Izzy were trying to keep me entertained, but all I wanted to do was to search for our missing friends. I was more worried than I thought I was letting on, but when I stood up to head to bed, Gina and Izzy very pointedly asked me where I was going.

"Guys, relax. I'm going to try and get some sleep. Hopefully they'll be back soon from wherever they have got to."

They watched me suspiciously, but stayed where they were and let me go, keeping their eyes on me the whole time until I climbed into my tent. I did not sleep, however. Instead, I turned on my small pocket torch and hid in my sleeping bag, reading one of the novels I had brought with me.

An hour or so later, I heard Gina and Izzy's tents being zipped up and the two of them talking quietly to each other through the canvas walls, probably so they would not disturb me. From the other side of the site I heard the boy's heavy duty zipper open and then close behind them. From what I could hear, Amaia and Alex had not returned. I was getting more worried with every passing minute.

Somehow, I managed to stay inside my sleeping bag, inside my tent, until I heard the campsite quiet down. All I could hear was the sound of night critters wandering around in the surrounding forest, and my own breathing. I waited a clear thirty minutes from the time I last heard anyone speak, before I shuffled out of my sleeping bag and into my jacket and jeans. If anyone asked, I was just going to the bathroom. I was not sure what my plan was, but I knew I could not sit still for one more minute.

I carefully edged the zipper down on my tent and clambered out, keeping the beam from my torch aimed down at the ground. I checked around but no one had stirred. I looked around the site but there was no sign of our friends having returned. I wandered over and checked their tents, but they were on the other side of mine from Izzy's and Gina's, and I had not heard anything from that area since I had climbed into my sleeping bag.

I decided to head to the bathroom block, just to check. I checked the female side to no avail. I was not brave enough to venture into the male side – I did have some decency after all – but I did consider it for a while. I stood outside, listening for some time. But there was no noise from inside, so I hoped for the best and left again.

I wandered up to the main office, debating with myself. *Should I raise the alarm?* I decided not to, at least not yet. They had only been gone a couple of hours and

were expert campers, if Amaia's claim was anything to go by. Surely, if they were lost in the woods, they would know to stay put.

I checked the dining room, but its door was locked for the night.

Too bad if they were hungry, I thought to myself, remembering that they had not eaten much, if anything, at dinner time. Then I laughed derisively at myself. I was their friend, not their mother. If they chose not to eat, that was their choice.

I was not sure what else I should do. I walked slowly back to our site, occasionally shining my torch into the trees, just in case they were lost in the woods – or that is what I told myself anyway.

I was not far from our campsite when I heard a strange noise. It sounded like a deep barking, which stopped and started over several seconds. I froze in place, listening. The wildlife sounds around me had stopped, suddenly deathly silent. The hairs on the back of my neck started rising. I flicked my torch off, standing silently in place for a few moments. My thoughts were racing. I was debating whether to turn my torch back on and run, or to keep my torch off and try to make it back to camp without the light. I was terrified, undecided about what to do for the first time in a long time. My legs shook, unsure whether to run or stay. Another round of shivers raced up my back and arms. I was sure that a hellish beast was standing in the woods, staring at me from in the dark. I dared not look around. I was barely breathing, waiting for the wildlife noises to come back.

After a couple of minutes' silence, I closed my eyes. I hoped that if I opened them again it would make it easier to see in the dark. I was holding my breath and my ears were starting to ring in the stillness around me. My heart was racing. I thought to myself, *Count to ten then run*. Mentally bracing myself to run, I exhaled quietly then inhaled another breath as I counted. *One, two, three, four, five...*

Suddenly the hell hounds were upon me. An icy hand clamped down on my shoulder. Another icy hand covered my mouth. I screamed, but the hands were strong, preventing any sound from escaping. I tensed, about to lash out with my arms, my heart and mind racing, when I heard an unexpected thing.

"It's okay! Don't scream, Cassie."

I froze, recognizing the whispering voice and trying to place it. Then a torch flicked on in front of me – my one that I had dropped in fright. It shone upwards, lighting up a chalky face surrounded by a cloud of dark ringlets.

I relaxed, realizing who it was. I heard another voice by my ear, one now very familiar to me.

“Promise you won’t scream the campground down?”

I nodded and Alex released me. I turned towards him and then did something even I did not expect. I threw myself at his surprisingly solid chest and burst into tears.

“Where the hell have you been?” I squeaked, speaking as loudly as I dared, trying to sound as angry as I could, despite my tears.

“Whoa!” he said, gently disentangling himself from my arms and holding me out at arm’s length. He stared into my eyes, worry momentarily etched onto his handsome face.

“I told you she would worry, but do you ever listen to me?” Amaia whispered urgently at him.

“Hey, Cassie, what were you worried about?” He seemed to be almost enjoying my display, his eyes now shining with barely contained mirth. I looked from his eyes to Amaia’s, and suddenly found myself wondering what I was worrying about.

“I don’t know. You guys just disappeared. Then there was an awful noise in the woods and I was so scared that the hell hounds would grab me...” I babbled almost incoherently in my confusion.

“Hell hounds?” Alex stifled a chuckle but I could see he was barely holding it in check.

“Well I’m glad you found it so funny!” I hissed at them, trying desperately to keep my voice at a whisper.

“Aww, hon!” Amaia whispered sympathetically. She glared at her brother for a few moments and he stopped looking so amused. “Cass, I’m sorry. We should have told you guys we were going to take off, but we are so used to doing stuff by ourselves that it didn’t even cross our minds,” Amaia apologized.

I glared at the pair of them for a moment or two, trying to be angry, but slowly the anger turned to relief.

“I’m just glad you guys are okay. I was thinking of calling the cops but...” I started.

“We were only gone for a couple of hours!” Alex exclaimed.

“SHHHH!!” Amaia shushed him.

“Sorry!” he whispered, before he started again, quietly. “We were only gone for a couple of hours, nothing to be worried about.”

I glared at him again, a little less angrily this time, then grabbed the torch from Amaia before storming off to our tent site.

This time I did not bother being quiet. I stomped up to my tent, opened the door zipper, climbed inside, closed it behind me and then threw my jacket on the floor. My torch went with it, plunging me into darkness.

“Oh, freaking typical!” I growled at myself, mostly under my breath. I felt around the floor of the tent, locating my jacket and my torch underneath. I flicked the switch back on and, getting rid of my jeans, I jumped into the cold sleeping bag. I turned my torch off and, as I settled down to sleep, I was sure I could hear Alex chuckling in the tent beside mine. *He was so infuriating!*

I tossed and turned for a few more minutes, but exhaustion overwhelmed me and I fell to sleep.

A Very Strange Occurrence

I woke up around nine-thirty. My sleep had been disturbed earlier, when Izzy asked whether I was going with Gina, the boys and her up Mount St. Helens to see if we could find where the meteor landed. I murmured something in the negative to her, then drifted back to sleep.

What woke me this time was my tent zipper, but I kept my eyes shut and snuggled deeper into my sleeping bag, wishing whoever it was would go away. My crying the night before had left me with a headache that had not quite worn off.

"I know you're awake, Sleeping Beauty," Alex's smooth, warm voice murmured beside my ear.

"Go away," I grumbled. "I'm still sleeping."

I could hear the smile in his voice, and a picture of him smiling sprang to my mind, as he spoke.

"I guess you don't want to see what I found last night, then?"

I screwed up my face, trying not to smile.

"I thought you didn't care what I thought."

He was silent for a few moments – so silent, that I thought he had managed to sneak out of the tent without me hearing him. I popped my head out of the sleeping bag and opened my eyes.

"Gotcha!" he greeted me, with a teasing smile.

I smiled, in spite of myself, at the grin on his face. I grabbed my pillow.

"I'm still mad at you," I said, as I threw my pillow at him.

He smoothly reached up and snatched it out of the air, as it flew towards his face. I blinked, surprised.

"Good catch," I admitted, secretly impressed.

One side of his mouth hitched up in a half-smile, as he eyed me up across the small space that separated us.

"My mother," I started, "would be very surprised at me, having a young male in my tent with me."

"I'm older than you are," he joked.

“Okay,” I amended, “me having an *older* male in my tent with me.”

“I can leave, if you like,” he suggested, making to get up.

“No. I thought you wanted to show me something,” I grumbled. “I’m awake now.”

His eyes lit up and he laughed; a beautiful sound in the quiet morning. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled something out, hiding it in his hands.

“Guess,” he said simply.

“Alex, it’s too early in the morning for guessing games!” I complained, rubbing my temple which had started throbbing again.

“C’mon, Cassie, it’s easy.”

I closed my eyes and saw, in my mind’s eye, streaks of red and gold on black. It reminded me of something I had seen recently.

“Shooting stars,” I said quickly, naming something outlandishly stupid, knowing I was miles off.

When Alex did not answer me straight away, I opened my eyes, thinking he had left again.

He was sitting there, staring at me. He looked surprised.

“Good guess!” he whispered as he opened up his hands. In his palms sat a burnt looking piece of stone, its surface puckered and holey, similar to a rock found in the center of a volcanic crater.

“That’s just a volcanic rock,” I commented.

He shook his head and shuffled closer to me, bringing the rock nearer. My head was still pounding, but I ignored it as I reached out to touch the rock. It was still hot; not burning, but comfortably warm, as if it had been sitting in a bowl of hot water for a few hours.

“It’s still warm,” I said, surprised, drawing my hand away from it. He nodded at me, his smile lighting up his eyes. “It’s because it’s been in your pocket,” I suggested, “or in your hand.”

He shook his head.

“Maybe you haven’t noticed, but I have a low body temperature.”

I nodded in agreement. His hands and his chest – as I had discovered the previous night when I threw myself against it – were surprisingly cool, definitely lower than normal body temperature.

“See? It’s even warmer than *your* body temperature.” He released the rock into my hands. As its unexpectedly heavy weight landed, I wrapped my hands around it, its warmth luxurious in the cool morning air.

Suddenly, the rock made a cracking noise. I jumped, surprised. Then my head exploded in pain, the headache back with a vengeance.

“Arrghhh!” I grimaced, my eyes locked on the rock as it started to change in front of me. I worried, for a moment, that I was having a brain hemorrhage, or that I was hallucinating what I was seeing: the rock changing color and shrinking in my hands. Then Alex reacted:

“What on earth?! Amaia! Get in here now!”

He leapt up briefly, his face more ashen than usual, if that were possible. Then he pressed me down onto the bed and his hands moved to my temples.

I felt like my head and hands were on fire. However, it was not an awful burning, just a mildly uncomfortable, but very hot, sensation. My hands had a grip on the rock that I could not release and my head was aching, throbbing along with my racing pulse.

“What’s happening?” I managed to gasp, as Alex’s hands pressed against my head. He stared into my eyes then, his eyes a deeper, richer green than I had ever seen them before.

“Cassie, everything’s going to be okay. Just hang on a couple more minutes. That’s all it usually takes.”

“All what usually takes?” I murmured weakly.

“I never dreamed, not in a million years, that you would... I’m so sorry.”

Amaia was in the tent then, taking in what was going on. Then she was at my head, her hands suddenly on my temples, cool and soothing. The pain was ebbing away and then it was gone. I blinked up at her, speechless. I was distracted by a light that appeared around her. It must have been a trick of the light through the canvas, but I could have sworn she was glowing. *No, but that was ridiculous!* I closed my eyes for a moment and when I opened them again, everything appeared to be normal.

Alex had my hands in his. His eyes were on my face, then he glanced back at my hands.

“Amaia,” he murmured, “I had no idea she would... If only I’d known...”

“You weren’t to know. No one ever does.”

Their cryptic conversation confused me, but my mind was more occupied with what was happening to my hands, or rather inside them. I could feel a sensation similar to the sensation felt when you crush ice crystals in your hands, but instead of being cold, it was hot. The heat had increased, but for some reason it was not bothering me too much. Suddenly I was aware of a change. The rock was all but gone, the weight in my hands much lighter and it felt different. Denser, as if the rock had compressed itself into...

"Crystal," I murmured. I knew what I would see, again seeing it in my mind's eye before I actually saw it.

Alex eyed me up, warily, then slowly released my hands, nodding to Amaia as he did. She released my head and, surprisingly, the headache did not return. I sat up with her help and stared down at my hands, barely daring to breathe.

I opened up my hands, revealing a pale green, teardrop-shaped crystal resting in my palm.

"Wow!" I whispered.

"Far out!" Amaia exclaimed, grinning.

Alex's reaction was far less impressive. He sat back on his heels, his face serious.

"How on earth am I going to explain this?" he murmured, more to himself than anyone else in the tent.

I was mesmerized by the crystal in my hand, its facets glinting in the late morning light that filtered through the canvas into the tent.

"It's so beautiful..." I murmured.

"Cassie," Alex started, his voice strained with urgency. "I've got to talk to you about something; something extremely important. But we can't talk about it here. Please, just please promise me you won't tell the others what happened here."

I glanced at him.

"Sure, if you insist," I said warily. "But you owe me an explanation."

"You'll get your explanation soon. I promise."

I stared again at the glittering crystal in my hand. It was captivating. I dragged my eyes away from it, realizing that it was not mine to keep. I looked up at Alex and offered it to him.

"No!" he said, shaking his head. "It's yours. I couldn't take it from you now, even if I wanted to. But trust me when I say that you need to keep it safe."

Even if I did not understand what had happened, even if I did not know what was going on, I did understand the emphasis he placed on that last sentence. I just wondered how I was going to keep the crystal on me at all times, so that I knew it was safe. I decided to think on it. In the meantime, I reluctantly tucked it away in my pocket.

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End of Sample Chapters...

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