

Indigo

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Merina Davis thought she was just a freak with weird eyes, but she's about to find out that she's much more than that.

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1 - Voices

I never knew why I was born how I was, but I always thought it was a curse. Being a psychic was something I couldn't find a reason to enjoy. It all started one day when I was coming home from school. From my first day in preschool, I had been unpopular, and time doesn't heal those things when you're stuck with those same one-hundred people in high school.

The walk home was long, but I had two friends, Callie and Bella, who always came with me, even if it was just to keep me company. There was also the reason of the girls who shared my route. Iris was their ringleader. She was beautiful, with her shiny, dark red hair and vivid green eyes, but everything about her radiated tension to me. One day, one of her friends had shoved me against a locker and yelled at me for doing something to her that I didn't remember. These were the sorts of things Iris inspired, not love poems.

Next to me, though, Callie was talking about her new boyfriend, and Bella was finding a way to contradict every good point that came up about the poor guy. I guessed they both knew him all too well. Maybe a dance or a blind date gone wrong had made him that unappealing? "He has no tact, no manners, and he can't dance at all," Bella snapped playfully. Arguing was their daily entertainment. "You're just jealous because he's cute and very not-yours," Callie retorted with a victorious smile.

"What do you think?" Callie asked me. Oh crap. That was the question I'd been dreading during the whole conversation. Getting into their arguments meant choosing one friend instead of two to hang out with until they forgot about it.

"I don't care," I admitted sheepishly. "I've never even met the guy."

"You've never met any guys," Iris teased, speeding up to keep pace with us. "Too ugly."

"You'd be pretty, but they all know you're way too sour," I smirked, and walked a little faster, seeing the corner where my house was.

"Cheap clothes, no makeup, cheap hair, I can't see how you'll be able to keep yourself from spinsterdom," she continued, and Callie and Bella were now shooting her looks that sent lightning through the air. I was about to send another insult her way, but suddenly, it sounded like Iris' friends were all talking loudly behind me.

"I'm scared. What if those eyes mean she's dangerous?"

"What'll I do if Iris gets angry?"

"Oh, man, I can't wait to see *this* catfight!"

Slowly, they built up into a dull roar, making my head throb until it was almost ready to explode. I clutched my head, trying to stop the tears from coming after listening to all the things I heard about me. Even Callie and Bella were scared. The voices said I was a freak, someone who would never belong. All I could do was stand there, trying to brace myself against all the things that were being repeated. "Shut up!" I screamed, and even Iris backed off.

Silence came, always welcome, but I saw a flash of white and then blacked out. The last sound I heard was my own violent sobbing.....

"Honey, are you alright?" My mom's voice was strained with worry, barely audible through the throbbing that had erupted in my head.

"I think she's fine, Jane," my dad said in a soothing voice. It was hard to calm my mom down, but I could hear the hysterics fading from her voice and her breathing. Somehow, my dad's voice had that magically soothing quality.

Kara, my younger sister by two years, just stared at me with shock on her face. I had never passed out, or even come close. From the digital clock on our dining room counter, I gathered that I'd been out for about three hours. "Merina, what happened to you?" Dad asked calmly, and I sat up, rubbing my head. Those voices were there, but they were quieter, like a frightened whisper. After passing out a block away from the house, I figured things couldn't get that much worse.

"I think I'm hearing voices," I admitted quietly. Even though I had resigned myself to fate or whatever was pushing me now, I cringed to think that after all these years, something had finally pushed me over the edge of insanity.

Everyone just stared at me for a moment, and I regretted saying what I had. The worst part was that you can't take back your confession of insanity. People also didn't say that sort of stuff to their parents to be funny. "Are they telling you to do bad things?" Mom asked, and her eyes reminded me of a deer in the headlights. "What do they say?"

"Nothing that I haven't heard before," I assured her, standing up to face her. "It's just like what someone might say in the situation I'm in."

That was when they kicked in again. "Is she suffering from a split-personality?" Kara. "Hopefully, this is all just a little bit of amnesia, and she's just in shock from whatever made her pass out." Dad.

"WHAT AM I GOING TO DO IF MY BABY'S CRAZY!" Most definitely Mom.

"Maybe I just need some sleep." Me.

My lips didn't move, though, and I was sure of it. Bruises from falling on the hard pavement made pretty splotches of black-and-blue on my skin, and I could feel the cool pain of every one of those. I could feel my heart racing from the panic I had undergone. Was I going completely crazy? Why was I hearing all these voices, but no one's lips were moving.

"Just go to your room, and they'll just think you're overtired." Kara was speaking to me, but I wasn't sure if her lips had moved or not.

"I think I'll just go to my room and get some sleep," I said with a brief smile. Dad helped me get up, and I heard him say, "Now 'atta girl. She'll wake up and realize it was all just a bad dream." Why would he be speaking to me in the third person? None of this made sense as I crawled into my bed and embraced the brief silence.

Thoughts came surfacing up in my head, and all of them were about this afternoon. Why had I passed out? And who did those voices belong to? I racked my brain over and over again for an answer. Maybe it had something to do with my eyes. They were a deep shade of purple, and people had said over and over again that they looked weird and made them feel uncomfortable. Even Callie had admitted once that one of her friends didn't want to hang out with us because my eyes made her feel like she was being watched. They had earned me the name Indigo among some of the popular cliques.

After hearing about this, none of my friends would come within a ten foot radius of me again. They would hear that I had gone to a shrink, and then they would assume that I was far too unstable to be around them. "This sucks," I hissed quietly. Alerting my parents with my private rant wasn't a very good idea either, and I wanted them to believe that I had kept my sanity.

Though I tried hard, my sanity could not be kept. The voices from that afternoon replayed in my head, and new ones added to the chaos, some that I didn't even come close to recognizing. *Whatever it is, I just want it to stop*, I thought tiredly, flopping down on my bed. *How long can this go on?* Finally, an interruption to the noise came into my room in the form of Kara. "Are you okay, Merina?" she asked, her quiet voice filled with concern. "I saw you right after you got back, and it...you didn't look good." I glared daggers at her, my indigo eyes piercing right through her.

"Scratch that," Kara continued. "You still don't look so good." With a sigh, I sat up and seethed silently while she sat down on my beanbag chair. "What do you want, squirt?" I asked testily. Hearing voices all day didn't make me all that eager for conversation. "Sheesh, just came to see if you're okay," she assured me. "You're still pale, and someone obviously got up on the wrong side of the bed today."

"Look," I said sharply, wishing she'd get out soon. "I just told Mom and Dad that I'm hearing voices, and they're going to send me to a shrink." "It won't be that bad," Kara said, keeping her cool. "Yes, it will," I retorted. "Just feed him some story, he'll say you're not crazy, and then we can all go back to life as we know it." "That's what you did to get out of therapy," I said firmly. "I'm not going to run away like that." "I wasn't running!" Her fist slammed down on my nightstand, and I got up swiftly.

Suddenly, I couldn't see my room anymore. It was Kara's room, and she was in there with a knife. Her white-blond hair fell over her face in gossamer curtains, and I could see the pain in her violet eyes. Mom's description of her came alive. With her flowing white blouse, she looked like an angel, but an angel wouldn't have been that sad. Outside the window, other kids were playing in the streets. In here, though, I could feel death looming over her.

"Don't do it!" I screamed violently, and then Mom came into the room, and she fell apart. Tears fell from those pained purple eyes, and I couldn't stand to watch. "It's okay, honey," she said softly. "We'll get help for you tomorrow." Her face buried in my Mom's bright pink sweater, that blonde head nodded up and down once in between sobs. Then, I was back in my room, with Kara standing right in front of me.

"Kara?" I asked wearily, and she nodded, walking forward. Her delicate frame shook as she tried to hold back the tears that wanted to come so badly. "It'll be fine," she lied, and stared into my eyes. The voices were still there, but one was screaming, "I want to help, and I want to so badly, but I don't know what to say, and I don't want her to hate me. What if she doesn't love me anymore? What if she just clams up now?" My breath came in ragged pants, and I had my own tears to hold back.

My hand reached out to pull my sister into a hug. "I love you, Kara," I whispered. "Just let me handle this, and we'll come out alright, 'kay?"

"Okay," she said with a snuffle, and that voice quieted down a little. "Just don't go screaming like that again or Mom and Dad won't be very convinced." She backed off and smiled up at me, her eyes glistening like well-polished amethyst.

"I screamed?" I said, quirking an eyebrow.

"We just won't mention it," Kara said with a hint of her old joy.

For a few seconds, I stood there, the voices murmuring furiously as ever in my head. "I still don't know what I'm going to do," I said, wiping away the few tears that had escaped. "People don't just forget it when you say you're hearing voices."

"Just listen and see if they can help, then," Kara said, her hair falling across her eyes in a way that reminded me of that haunting vision.

"Okay. Thanks for seeing if I was okay, Kara," I said, and gave her one more quick hug before shooing her out of the room.

Being alone made speaking unnecessary, but it also meant I was alone with those voices. They were a massive din now, but I figured it must be like a crowded mall. When you're preoccupied, like I was with Kara, they all sound like white noise. However, once you open your ears a little more, you start to hear a few of the people clearly. That opening happened while I sat on my bed with my legs drawn up to my chest.

At first, there were only a few comments, but eventually, I found one voice that fascinated me. It had a rich tone, and I listened to the seductive words as they talked on. It didn't matter what that voice said; it was enough to sit there and listen to the beautiful timber, with its perfectly articulated style. "She has to be here somewhere," it said, and I could imagine a pair of full red lips uttering those words, dripping with the honey that characterized their easy languor. "Why do I have to find some bratty teenager anyway? Jewel could find her in a heartbeat."

My eyes snapped open, and I just realized I had squeezed my eyelids shut when that voice faded away into nothing. I cursed inside for letting my concentration slip like that. Though it was one of the prettiest voices I had ever heard, it was harder to concentrate on, like something was pushing me away from that one. Instead, I just heard the same, normal, mundane voices I had before. So, considering the disappearance of that tantalizing voice, I went downstairs to see if there was anything to eat.

The refrigerator didn't have much to offer, but I took a couple pieces of pizza and popped them in the microwave for a couple minutes. Kara came down the staircase and flashed a smile before sitting down in the living room with Mom and Dad. A loud beeping sound made me jump, and I turned around to see that it was just my pizza. I took my plate to the table and flipped open a magazine that I was usually able to engross myself in. However, considering I hadn't eaten in about ten hours, the pizza was much more enticing, so it stole most of my attention.

"Come on in and sit down," Dad invited, patting a seat on the couch. I huddled myself up on the couch and smiled when he wrapped an arm around my shoulders. Quite obviously, he was relieved that I looked a little less pale, and that I wasn't doing anything to set Mom off.

"Feeling better, Meri?" Mom asked nervously. Honestly, I hated that nickname, and I had ever since she started using it for me at age two. Tonight, though, I would do anything to show my parents that I had no

need of mental help. The last thing I wanted was to explain to the shrink about my little problem.

The TV kept on flashing bright blue across Kara's face as I watched her subconsciously. What was she thinking about right now? Sure, she had come in an attempt to help me, but I thought I had heard a little bit of anger in her voice. Mom and Dad were talking, but what they said only flitted through my mind briefly before I moved on. All that mattered right now was finding a silence before I was deemed crazy, and it seemed like the voices were almost shut out in this half-trance I'd fallen into.

Hours seemed to pass like seconds, and soon everyone else had gone upstairs to sleep. Alone on the couch, I laid my head on the throw pillow and smiled. The voices were back now, but they were weakened. "I hope she notices me tomorrow," one said. "I bought that card and everything." "She has to be in this area. It's the only place I haven't searched in this pathetic town." I gasped silently, recognizing the slow but pretty tone of the voice from before. It was louder this time, and I wanted to hear that fantasy voice again, hear the only words that I wanted to listen to.

My eyes slowly slid shut, and I saw myself in the eighth grade, smiling with my light brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. That was a picture Mom had taken at my eighth grade graduation, I was sure of it. That image stayed for a while, and then faded into nothing. Only the voice remained. "I have to find her before tomorrow....I have to take her back." I sat bolt upright that time, terrified like never before. Why did someone like this want me? Was she even a real person?

Vague whispers lingered in my head after that, and most of it was just my own thoughts. I was running through the options for why someone would want vengeance on me. My entire life, I had picked on, but for the most part I took it and moved on. Not much fazed me after all the teasing I went through in my younger years. Having eyes like mine was different, and people are usually scared of different. It threatens their safe existence. Maybe because I was such a natural freak, I wasn't stressing out about this new development in my life. It was just one more thing to deal with.

Something clicked in my mind at that very moment. Someone might be out to get me, and the voices were persisting even after the shock. To tell the truth, I was quite calm at the time. Who knew what else was just waiting to spring itself on me? After this was all over, I might not be able to move on and smile at school the next day. Callie and Bella wouldn't recognize me after all this was over.

Rolling over, I let my arm dangle off the couch and sighed. Nobody could help me, but I needed to figure out how to suppress the voices at the very least. They were mounting now, and I could hear them practically yelling. Before, it was usually just mundane chatter, but now I heard shouts of excitement, screams of terror, and just plain gibberish. I clutched at my head, rolling onto our soft, blue carpet. Aside from the pain in my head, my entire body started to feel it. It was like getting hit everywhere all at once. No matter how hard I tried, it kept on racking my body over and over again.

I forgot about everyone else in the house and let a scream fly, then panted on the floor, resting my forehead on my forearms. It was still there, though. The pain lashed me again and again until I felt like I couldn't move. It was hopeless. I was going to die alone on my living room floor, and I was going to die crazy. That was the only thing I could think about as I truly panicked for the first time in my life.

2 - Shade

II.Shade

Something touched me and I rolled over away from it. No matter who was trying to help me, it didn't matter. I was dying, beyond help. "Calm down," a familiar voice cooed. "Whatever this is, fight it!" My brain said yes, but my body said no. This distant voice made my wild emotions calm down. It reminded me of all the people who would want me to fight this pain and get over it. Mom, Dad, Kara, and maybe even Callie and Bella. A soft whimper escaped my lips, and someone started stroking my hair slowly.

Another wave of pain hit me, and the surge of voices drowned out whatever this comforter had to say to me. None of them said anything in particular, but it felt like thirty people were screaming in my ear all at once. "Stop," I sobbed helplessly. "Just make it stop." My eyes were practically sealed shut, and the tears that flowed from them were enough to make a river. My chest heaved violently, and my fingernails dug deep into our plush carpet.

I shook, and I wasn't sure if it was from the pain, or if someone was trying to shake me awake. The screaming only got louder, but as it increased in small increments, my pain seemed to double and triple with every second. My screams echoed through the house, but they weren't as loud as the voices. Finally, one beckoned to me, and all the others stopped. My eyes snapped open, and I was staring down at thick, red liquid that dripped down my forearms. The voice's owner seemed to be smiling from its sickly sweet sound. "Come with me," it said. "You won't feel anymore pain if you come with me." My jaw dropped, and I wished I could be there. All thoughts were cleared from my mind as I tried to reach out and find the voice.

"They couldn't hear you scream," that voice said softly. "After all, they don't want to know that you've gone crazy." Still weak, I rolled over so that I was lying on my back, and I found my head in someone's lap. I felt the warm softness of bare skin against my head, and then some silky sort of fabric. A hand stroked my cheek, and I smiled, already slowing the pace of my thoughts. Somehow, this person was blocking me from the voices. Maybe it was just my desire to follow that tantalizing voice.

So I am crazy, I thought to myself, remembering the voice's comment. *My parents might be right in getting help for me after all.*

"You're not going to stay around long enough to let them take you to the therapist, are you?" she asked, playing with my hair slowly.

"Where else would I go?" I murmured. "I can't run away from home."

"But you're special," she cooed, emphasizing that last word. Oh, I knew I was special, just not in a good way.

"I'm crazy," I stated flatly.

"Haven't you ever wondered why you and your sister have the eye color you do?" she asked, raking her fingers through my light brown hair.

To tell the truth, I never had. All I had ever thought about was what a freak I was *because of* my eyes. Not once had I thought about them as a gift. Were they something to make me look prettier? What on earth was this woman getting at?

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Why do my eyes matter?"
"They're a symbol of just how special you are," she said, and I could hear the motherly smile in her voice. "You can do things that no one else I've seen can do, but it's no good if you can't control it."
"I don't have anyone to teach me," I griped. How could I listen to a voice like that and persist with my complaining? Wouldn't she get sick of me soon at this rate?

Those hands stopped toying with my hair, and one rested on my shoulder. "Take my hand," she said. "Tell me that you will trust me, and all will be revealed in time." I hesitated, unsure of what she would want me to do. This voice begged to be trusted, but I almost thought it was too good to be true. "Tell me what you want from me," I said, my questioning nature coming back as my thinking cleared. "I'll show you how to prevent another episode like that," she said, rubbing my upper arm. "I'll show you just how special you are."

I listened to her words and smiled. No more rolling on the ground in pain. No more voices drowning out reality. Then again, maybe this was just another voice, and I was just crazy. Who knew? For all my great judgment, I was living in my own world of havoc and hallucinations. Just great. Now I got to decide whether I was going to embrace the fact that I was crazy or continue fighting my parents. Neither option seemed all that appealing, considering my Mom's capacity for hysterics.

"Don't look up," she commanded, and I didn't, hoping she would give me answers if I obeyed most of her commands. "I'm just a shadow, part of your imagination. At least if they see you lying down now, they'll just think you're daydreaming." With a dopey smile on my face, I turned my head over and settled, getting around my long hair.

"I don't know that you're a shadow," I replied, braiding my hair and tying it off with a black elastic. "How can I believe that this isn't all a dream? It seems surreal enough."
"You have to trust me," she replied softly. "Just take my hand and we can escape from all this pain that is being inflicted upon you." That pale hand extended toward me again. A bracelet of shiny, black pearls encircled that delicate wrist and I touched them curiously.

"They're real," she said, and I heard her smile once again, buried in the inflections in her voice. "As real as you and I. Now come along, Merina. Dawn is slowly finding its way home, and we still have a decision to make." My brain raced with indecision, and a few of the screaming voices crept back into my head. A tear dripped out of my eye, and I saw those pearls flash in the electric blue light of the TV as she wiped away my tear.

"I want it to stop," I whimpered, barely holding back the tears of frustration and fatigue. That was all I could choke out. Nothing else mattered, and I didn't care if she could cure me. It could be temporary.

I blinked a couple times and then shifted my position again, keeping my hands firmly away from the hand that seemed to belong to a perfect, porcelain doll. All my life, I hadn't known about these voices, and now this lady showed up and said I was special. How did I know that it wasn't just another voice, telling me what to do? This was supposedly the sort of stuff schizophrenic people went through. Voices came into your head, and they told you to do things that were often interlaced with paranoia. This was just a voice telling me to run away from home. What would I do after that?

"What if I don't want to run away?" I asked in my best bratty voice. "What if I want to stay with my parents, and you're just a figment of my imagination?"

"Well, they'll label you schizophrenic and shove some prozac down your throat for good measure," she replied, and I heard a soft, musical giggle. "Silly child, you're seventeen, and you still can't comprehend what's going on around you."

"I can't run away," I snapped, realizing how irritating her sarcasm had become. "I don't know where I'll go or what I'll do. Not to mention, I don't have any money."

"You don't need money where you're going," she answered smugly. "Jewel will take care of you."

Suddenly, I remember the first time I heard this voice speaking, when I was lying on my bed. "*Jewel could find her in a heartbeat.*" That made running away from this lackey of hers really, pathetically pointless. This "Jewel" would be able to find me anyway, and she would probably force me to come if I didn't go along of my own volition. Then again, it could be an empty threat, a ruse to force me into some sort of stupid criminal act.

"I'm not coming," I said firmly, "not until I get some answers."

"Fine," the woman said. "I'll come back tomorrow night, right here, and we'll discuss the matter further."

"Wait," I said pathetically.

"What is it?" she asked, stroking my hair.

"Can I know your name?"

"I don't have one," she replied. "I'm nothing more than a shade."

My head slipped silently down to the floor, and I heard the rustle of clothes. A graceful yawn stole through the other woman's lips, and I smiled dumbly. Even if she was a little--heh heh-- shady, that was the first time since hearing the voices that someone had talked to me without making it sound like I had a problem. Even Dad, who was trying to be calm and collected for Mom's sake was breaking apart at the seams. Now that the woman was gone, I heard his voice creep into my head, and I listened carefully, noticing the stressed tone he had.

"I want her to be happy," he was saying in a defeated tone. "I want Kara to be happy too. Is that just too much to ask, or is someone out there against me? Have I been a terrible father or something?" I sighed and droned out the voices as best I could. After knowing what that perfect silence felt like, it was easier to go back.

Anyway, when my parents settled down together to have a family, they were young, just about nineteen or so. They'd actually done a fine job with parenting, but they hadn't gotten to live the part of someone's life when you usually learn about babies 101. Every once in a while, this little road block convinced them that they were bad parents, unfit to have any children. I thought they were good, and all my problems came from me, not from them. They hadn't chosen to have two children with funny eyes. They hadn't chosen to make me crazy. Chance was throwing us a curveball, and none of us were dealing with it well.

I let my mind wander for a few minutes, but I also made sure to hold on to the silence. Before long, it had taken me over, and I was sound asleep on the living room floor.....

When I woke up, I couldn't feel anything through the grogginess. Somehow, I had made it back to my bed, and a small jewel the color of my eyes rested on the nightstand. "Unh?" I mumbled, examining it

carefully. Where it had been sitting, there was a note.

To Merina, as a token of my trust. Hopefully we can come to share it.

I wiped the sleep from my eyes and looked at it. Right away, I knew what I should do. Just like those black pearls, this was special, and I couldn't lose it. I took a phonebook and my coat and got ready to go for a walk on this beautiful Saturday morning. Everyone else would be sleeping in, so I had time. Grabbing my purse, I slipped out the door and started heading toward downtown.

Everything was crowded downtown, but this was the first time I didn't enjoy it. Here, the voices began to mount to so many that it was hard to maintain my beautiful silence. They were loud, too, almost exuberant. No wonder. The first snow was falling, and a thin sheet of white made everything look very picturesque. Maybe our downtown would make the next popular Christmas card.....or maybe not.

Suddenly, I stopped and turned into *Monique's Bijouterie*, or *Monica's Jewelry Store*, for those of us who *aren't* from a foreign country. The woman behind the counter was very short, with a slight build. Her black, curly hair fell to her shoulders in one mass of wide ringlets. Blue, blue eyes peered out, a smile touching them ever so gently. "Good morning," she said with a heavy accent. "How may I help you?" "I want this set in silver," I told her, figuring that gold would be on the side of both gaudy and expensive. I had plenty of money, but if I left home, I didn't want to be stuck almost broke for the sake of making some pretty jewelry.

"What would you like?" the saleswoman asked me with a smile. "A necklace, a ring, a locket?" "I think I'll take a necklace. Can you make it a short chain, though?"

"I have the perfect idea!" she exclaimed, digging through some box behind the counter. Finally, she opened up a jewelry box and showed me one of the most gorgeous pieces I had ever seen. It was a short chain, with several others festooned along its length. In the center was a silver oval with a pattern of a vine and leaves engraved in it. My jaw dropped, and my hand reached eagerly for my purse.

After I had regained control of myself, I smiled and took out my wallet. "How much does that one cost?" I asked, knowing I would probably pay whatever it was. "A lot of people said it was too old fashioned, and it wasn't selling, so I'll take forty-nine dollars for it," she stated with a smile, happy that I loved it so much. "Also, I wouldn't want you to be unable to afford something that pleases you so much. May I see the jewel you want me to set in there?"

I pulled the jewel out of the pocket in my purse that it had stayed in, and noticed that it didn't have a scratch. When she saw it, the woman almost squealed with delight. "I've never seen anything like this!" she proclaimed, scrutinizing the round, indigo orb. "It is perfect in every way. How did you acquire such a jewel?"

"It was a gift," I replied quietly.

"I'll have it ready by tomorrow," she replied, eager to get to work on this fascinating new project. "You can pay me then."

Slowly, I bid the woman farewell and after noticing the time, I started running back to my house. It felt good to be running so fast that my lungs were straining, that even if I was hearing more voices, I could only concentrate on filling my lungs up again. If I didn't I would fall over dead for sure. That would be my second experience with death, and if I could help it, I didn't want to be able to have a third. Not

that I didn't want to live. It was just that.....well, the pain.

When I finally got home, it looked like everyone was up. I strolled in the door panting, pretending to be casual. "Where have you been, Merina?" Mom asked, immediately going into freak-out mode. "I went for a run," I stated with a shrug. "Do you mind if I call Callie and Bella? I just want to see how they're doing." I didn't wait for an answer as I smiled and went upstairs with the cordless phone in hand.

I could have dialed either of those two numbers in my sleep. Considering she was more of a morning person, I decided to call Bella first. The phone rang twice before I heard Bella's mom answer with a shaky "hello?".

"This is Merina," I said casually. "Is Bella home?"

"She's....well, she's at the hospital right now," the woman answered on the other end. I could hear her voice quivering. "Sh-she was i-in a car accident, and she had to go in for surgery."

My mouth gaped open as I sat there in shock. What had happened that afternoon? Why would Bella have been hurt that bad. "Thank you for telling me, and....I'm sorry to have bothered you," I said breathlessly, and hung up. It could have been completely separate from the happenings of that day, but somehow I knew it wasn't. Something had happened, and it was way bigger than I could ever be.

3 - A Fresh Start

III.A Fresh Start

I didn't even have the nerve to call Callie's house. What if she had also been hurt somehow by what had happened just yesterday? That was just what I needed--something to tear my mind apart once more. If this kept on going, I wasn't sure how much more I could take. The shade wouldn't come until tonight, and I wanted my answers right then. What had happened to Callie and Bella? Was Callie even alright? Slowly, with a shaky hand, I dialed the number and waited.

Each ring seemed like torture. Finally, I gave up and tried her cell phone. In little more than two rings, someone was on the phone. I easily recognized the sound of her mom's voice and my hands shook even more. "Hello," I said, and I found that even my voice was quavering. "I-is Callie there?" "She's in the rehabilitation unit," her mom replied. "They won't even let us see her until she's out of there. They won't tell us what's wrong with my baby." For a moment, I let my jaw hang slack. She sounded like she'd been holding this in for a long time.

"Would it be okay if I came to the hospital to visit her?" I asked, and Callie's mom's voice brightened.

"I think that would really make her day," she choked out unsteadily. "Thank you, Merina." She hung up and I was alone with myself and the resurfacing voices. They all sounded so happy, so sickeningly casual while my two best and only real friends were in the hospital. I picked up a picture of the three of us and held it close to me, wanting to disappear into that reality where we were all together and laughing again, where we could call each other and be there for each other all the time.

A knock sounded on my door, and I put down the picture, trying to compose myself as quickly as possible. "Merina?" Mom called, and I cringed. We didn't need something like this to send her into hysterics. Once she got going, my Mom would have me in therapy in two seconds flat.

"I'm busy," I yelled back quickly, hoping the tense edge to my voice wouldn't tip her off. "Come on, Merina," she said calmly. "Let's go for a drive, okay?"

My eyes snapped shut, and that was the one time I wished the voices would come back full force. Just so I would have an excuse not to go on a "drive" with my Mom. Yes, I loved her, but I didn't know where on Earth she would take me. Therapist, psych ward, asylum, padded cell. I could see it all happening if I let her take me. If I went with the shade, though....no, she was a total dangerous stranger, but.....a dangerous stranger who made me feel better than Mom ever could.

Lost in my own thoughts, I easily drowned out Mom's shouts before she burst through the door in an angry huff. Her fair hair was falling out of its messy bun, and I saw tear-streaks on her cheeks. Kara and I had done things to make her upset, but nothing like this. She hadn't been this bad even after Kara's suicide attempt. "This is ridiculous, Merina!" she shouted furiously. "We're going now, and you're going to talk to someone if you won't talk to me!" Oh, crap, a thousand times over. Now I had done it.

Tears came to my eyes, but I forced them back. Mom couldn't see me cry, or...I let them go, and she rushed over. Really, I felt bad for doing this to her. This was the worst she'd looked in a long time. "I'm sorry, Mom," I whimpered, and the casual, happy voices were overpowered by one loud one screaming,

"I don't want you to die. I want my happy, normal baby back! I want us to be a happy family again, and I don't want to know that my baby's gone crazy." It was most definitely my mom, and I wrapped my arms around her. She started to cry too, and I buried my face in her shoulder.

"I want us to be normal again, too," I said. "I just don't know if I can stop myself from hearing these things."

Her eyes went wide open, and I looked up at her face. There was that pain that I had seen in Kara's eyes, except this was mixed with a blatant confusion. Unlike either of us, Mom's eyes were blue, and they looked like the ocean with those tears rising in them. "How did you know....?" Her eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"I don't know," I admitted. "A voice told me, and I thought you were yelling at me." She backed off a couple steps.

"Get in the car," she panted, and I obeyed silently.

While I was gone, she had thrown a few suitcases full of my stuff into the car, and I just remembered now that most of my wall decorations were gone. "What's up with this?" I asked, and though her lips didn't move, my mom answered,

"You'll be going someplace safe, where you can start anew." That didn't sit well with me, but after our little episode, I didn't dare say anything.

We drove and drove before Mom finally spoke to me. "I didn't want to do this to you Merina," she said slowly. "I know you like your old friends and everything, but I think it'll be good for you to go someplace fresh, where all this stuff hasn't happened."

"I don't want to leave," I said in a very pronounced manner. "Callie and Bella need me. Now. At home."

"Well, I found this boarding school," she said, sounding almost afraid of telling me the news. "It's for....well, special children."

"Why are you sending me to a school for retarded kids!" I screamed, fury coursing through my veins. "I can get help or whatever you want, but I want to do it at home!"

She gave me that look that told me she was at a loss for what to do. What about Kara, anyway? When she had problems, Mom and Dad didn't just shove her off to some stupid boarding school without her consent. They went and took her to therapy, let it slide, and moved on. Didn't they think that maybe I was just in shock? After all, according to what I'd been hearing, both my best friends had just been in car crashes. Wasn't that reason enough for me to be tearing myself apart? Wouldn't anyone react like that?

"Kara didn't hear voices and then clam up like you did," I heard Mom say. Her voice was firm and instructive, but inside I could tell she was ready to break.

"It's been one day," I said irritably. "It took Kara a while to get over things, but she did." I saw something inside Mom snap, and she put on a stoic look and pressed on the gas a little harder. I refused to look at her, holding to my stance as the angry, rejected child.

"I just wish this had never happened!" she screamed hysterically, and I looked over, surprised by what I saw.

That stoic look was still on her face, her fingers gripping the steering wheel so tightly that her knuckles were white. This time, though, I didn't respond to her. I watched my mom, wondering at how she'd stayed so pretty over the years. Maybe, when she was younger, she was a model. Then again, she was too motherly, too unstable to settle down in a career. I could see her as a young, flighty secretary. "Mom?" I ventured.

"Yes, Merina?"

"I'm sorry I've been such a brat," I said quietly. "I've been dealing with a lot of things since yesterday, and I've just been figuring out how to handle them. It's nothing against you, or Dad, or Kara."

It probably took a few seconds for my words to actually sink in before Mom smiled at me and said, "I know that you're going through a lot. It's just.....well, just don't scare me like that again." Tension still held her voice, but I knew that had helped a little bit. "I'm so glad she's not mad at me," I heard her whisper under her breath, and I grinned inwardly. In the end, my mom was a little flighty, but she just wanted the same things as everyone else--to love and to be loved. I did love her, despite her hysterics, but she needed her little assurances here and there every once in a while.

"It's hard, Merina," Mom continued softly. "I remember seeing you as a little baby, when you had just been born, and you needed me so much. Now I feel kind of, well, extraneous."

"You're not," I argued, watching the long, ornately forested driveway that was coming up. "I just need my room now that I'm getting older. I'm not going to have you forever after all."

"Have fun at school," she said, and I realized that we had pulled up already and a tall, dark-haired woman was waiting to escort me to wherever I was staying.

"Love you, Mom," I replied, and gloomily let the woman take two of my suitcases while I carried the third.

"Welcome to Lamont Boarding School," the escort said with a warm smile. Her voice was pretty, but very quick and businesslike at the same time. Dark hair tied back into a severe bun, she wore black horn-rimmed glasses and a fitted black dress. "My name is Diana, if you need me," she continued. "I am the assistant headmistress."

"I'm....Merina," I replied shakily, and started lugging my suitcase wherever she was leading me.

"Here is the main complex," she prattled, gesturing toward a cluster of large, ornate buildings. "And there is the residential complex." This was one enormous building that seemed to go on forever. One set of double doors loomed almost twenty feet over my head.

When we entered the residential complex, there were two corridors, each going off in an opposite direction. Diana led me down the left-hand hallway, and I made a mental note of that. We went up a few staircases, and through some doors, all of which I tried to mark. However, we eventually got up to a simple, brown door. Behind it was a room with two twin beds pressed against opposite walls. A dresser was shoved against the third wall, and a closet was in the fourth wall. The beds were simple, with dark brown comforters thrown over a white blanket and sheets. The entire room was spotless, so I was guessing that I would be alone, at least for a little while.

"Do I have a roommate?" I asked, just for the sake of confirming this glorious peace.

"No," Diana replied. "You may have one soon, though, if we get any more new arrivals."

"I'm fine alone, really," I assured her. "I don't socialize well." Most people made fun of me at first because of my eyes, and I didn't want to be stuck *living* with one of *them*. Diana said her farewells to me, and left me to get settled in.

Just in case they stuck me with a roommate, I put all my clothes in only half the dresser and a little less than half of the closet. In the event that I got asked to a dance, my mom had packed a brand new dress for me. It was a deep blue dress that had a slit in the front going down about halfway down my torso. I smiled at Mom's taste in clothes, knowing that she knew this dress would bring out my eyes. It really was gorgeous, with a light dusting of glitter worked into the fabric. Low silver heels had been packed just for this purpose, and I shook my head. My mom had been thinking I would get asked to prom here, at a ritzy school, when I hadn't even gotten asked on a *date* in my small hometown.

Everything was unpacked, and I rested my chin on the dresser and closed my eyes. Suddenly, they shot right back open as I noticed the necklace that I was supposed to have picked up sitting right on top of the dresser. It looked beautiful, and I had almost forgotten the beauty of that jewel in the drama of that afternoon. Immediately, I stripped down and put on the prom dress my mom had packed. It emphasized my cleavage so that I looked much more full-figured, and the slit didn't end up going too far down. The back was slightly low cut, and the fabric clung to my skin. I felt the skirt brush my feet, and I realized that it would probably come very close to sweeping the floor, even with those potentially dangerous heels on.

And then the finishing touch. I clasped the necklace about my neck, and it seemed to fit perfectly. The jewel shone, but not so brightly that it lost its deep hue. Slowly, I turned to look in the mirror on the closet door, and I couldn't help but gasp. My tall, willowy figure looked beautiful for once, rather than skinny and juvenile. The necklace went perfectly with the dress, and the polished silver gleamed in a gentle contrast to the dress and the jewel. To be honest, I was quite pleased that I had chosen silver over gold. I took my hair up in one hand, imagining that it looked like I hoped it would on the night I wore that dress.

Still wearing the gown, I sat down on my bed, and fell down on my back. That entire day had been one chunk of stress, and I glared at the space on my nightstand where a phone would have been in any hotel room. The voices had died until they were a low whisper, and I tried fighting them back, just as the shade had told me to do. Tomorrow was Saturday, so I figured I would have plenty of time to work on this, but I wanted to figure it out at least partially before nightfall. That was when the voices had amplified themselves last, and when I had almost died. Needless to say, I didn't want to go through that again.

The emptiness of the room, which had been welcoming at first, only proved to be a distraction. I felt like someone else should be there, what with the empty bed and all. Shadows danced across the ceiling, and I saw Callie and Bella in every one of them. They glared daggers at me, telling me that I wasn't their friend anymore. I had hurt them, and I didn't even know what I had done. "Don't leave me alone," I begged, curling up into a ball. With my beautiful dress and its flowing skirt, I felt like a distraught faerie. In a world where I should have been magical, I was just a freak of nature, which gave people a reason not to like me.

My eyes slid open, but remained mostly closed. Mom loved me, but she had still followed through with this insane plan. Why didn't she realize that I didn't want to be in a place like this? I didn't want to be forced to interact with other people outside my old friends. My old situation was comfortable, and at that time, I could have used a little comfort.

Tired of sitting alone, I changed into some jeans and a chocolate-colored t-shirt. The faerie gown was hung up carefully in my closet, and I left the necklace on for fear of losing it. Outside, sunshine was beating down on this forested, ornate campus. People looked at me funny, and I smiled back at those

who grinned at me. Two girls and a guy were standing off to the side, and they looked like nothing but trouble. The shortest one looked tough, with short black hair that had red streaks in it. She wore an orange tube top and a miniskirt. *Hooker*, I thought with a snicker.

The other two looked much less dangerous, but they were still threatening. A tall girl stood next to the guy. She also had straight black hair, but it was much longer with two blue streaks in the front. The boy was over six feet tall, and he had blonde hair and honey-colored eyes. They made me want to melt, but at the same time, I felt that there was something lurking behind those model-esque good looks. His black fleece jacket fit his lean, muscular body, and his dark jeans hung on him in a very flattering way.

"Oh, shut up Eric," the girl in the miniskirt said in a joking way. "They won't last ten minutes here. Not unless...." Her voice got so quiet that I couldn't hear her anymore, so I moved on slowly. Other kids were standing around in clusters, and one girl looked up at me from her place leaning against a tree. She was the only other person I had ever seen with strange eyes outside of my family. Hers were a bright red, like a cheap photograph. Except, they looked natural on her, and they were a good contrast to her yellow-blond hair. Long strands hung in her face, partially hiding her frown.

I cautiously scanned the area, wishing that the rest of the people would be normal. Most of them were, though. A perky redhead came up to me with a shy smile on her face. "Hi," she said quietly. "I'm Lily. Are you new here?"

"Yeah," I said with the same shy mannerisms. Interacting with strangers was quite clearly not my forte. "I'm a student here as of about four hours ago." Lily smiled and nodded, and then started leading me off to a group of girls.

"Guys, this is...."

"Merina," I finished shortly, staring at my feet. She seemed eager to see me accepted into her circle of friends, and I liked this girl. I liked her enough that I didn't want to disappoint her so soon.

All of them started introducing themselves, and there were three friendly teens and a few others who stared indifferently at my eyes. I knew better than to think that they were looking into my eyes. The three were Ian, Terri, and Lyn. They let me and Lily sit down with them and start chatting, while a couple of their friends wandered off on their own, clearly rejecting me.

"So, where'd you come from?" Lyn asked, running a hand through her dirty blonde curls.

"I live about two hours from here," I replied with a quick smile. "Dalesburg."

"Oh, I have cousins from there," Terri volunteered, and plucked a piece of grass up. "I've never been out there, though. I live out in the city. Much more exciting, I'm sure." Oh, great, city people. This made them much harder to relate to, and therefore much more intimidating. I noticed that Ian was staring right at me, but it was like he was staring through me, right at my darkest secrets.

"Are you going to the dance next Friday?" Lily asked me. "It's just a casual dance, so there wouldn't be any issue finding a dress or anything like that."

"If you need something, I have plenty of stuff that would look great with those eyes of yours," Lyn said with a smile. I could tell she was the future-fashion-designer type. Most likely, she would be trying to get me to take time putting on mascara and lip gloss. Terri was a city girl, but she seemed alright nonetheless. Something made me curious about Ian. He wasn't talking at all, but he still seemed to be friendly toward me.

We wasted a lot of time while I got to know their stories, their backgrounds, and all that stuff. Through all this, though, Ian had very little to say. The bell rang for dinner and the girls all got up to go eat. For a few minutes, I sat there alone with Ian. He stared at me with his grey-blue eyes and then sat next to me. "Merina," he began. "I was wondering....are you going to the dance next Friday?" "It depends...." I began, totally guessing where he was heading. Something gave me a hunch. "I didn't want to ask you or anything. It's just....well, I wanted to make sure that you came, so that you'll get to meet more people."

Now that I had him alone, I decided I might as well ask Ian about the group I'd seen earlier. "Those three," Ian began, and then cooled down his tone, as if holding something back. "The short one's Blaize, the other girl's Brianna, and their little boy-toy is Eric. He used to be a good guy, and then he started hanging out with the two of *them*."

"So they're bad news, huh?" I said quietly, listening to Ian while he whispered in my ear. "Pretty much," he breathed. "That creep Eric, he....he hurt Lily. Big time. He's the reason why she's always so scared."

It made me hate him so much. To see Lily so eager and gentle and pretty, and to know that someone had pushed her into the self-conscious terror I'd seen in her eyes every once in a while. It made me sick. "What'd he do?" I demanded.

"He was her boyfriend for a while, and then she caught him making out with Blaize," Ian said with a hint of disgust in his voice. "He told her that it was all an accident, but we're all pretty sure he did more than just make out with Blaize. Just....don't go blabbing to anyone."

"Okay," I said quietly. "And Ian, you don't have to play it so cool. I'll go to the dance with you," I whispered in his ear.

"Thanks," he said. "Sorry I couldn't ask you straight out. Your eyes kind of scared me."

With a grin, I stood up and let him show me around campus. Here, at least some people seemed to think my eyes were cool instead of hating me for what I couldn't change. Maybe, just maybe, I could start a new, better life at this academy.

4 - New Friends

IV. New Friends

Ian walked me back to class, and there was a lot of elbowing and teasing from Lyn and Terri. Lily just sort of smiled at me, as if she was happy to see that I was happy. It was still hard to imagine anyone being able to hurt such a creature. "He was just being a gentleman," I threw in. "Chivalry's not *completely* dead, you know!" That got a giggle from Terri, and she made one of those lenses with her fingers, snapping a picture of me and Ian. "You two are just adorable," she said, and a grin flashed across her face as she exchanged glances with Ian.

"Leave her alone," Lily piped up softly. "Merina's new, and I think we should all make her feel welcome." Everybody stopped talking and looked at her. I could hear a low murmur of voices talking about how Lily always kept everyone on track in the moral department, but it could be awkward sometimes. With a grin, Lyn got us talking about what we were all going to wear to the dance, since she presumed we were all going, and that got us chatting again. Even Lily was excited to tell us. She had brought something just for the occasion, and apparently it was going to be great.

This all just reminded me of Callie and Bella a little too much. Between the three of us, I was the quiet one, and the two of them would go off on tangents and get wrapped up in whatever they were talking about, while I stood by and watched pleasantly. With a euphoric smile on my face, I remembered all those good times with my best friends.....

"Where'd you get that?" Lyn asked curiously, and I realized she was touching my necklace. "It's gorgeous. Didn't know gemstones came in that color." "It was a gift," I replied with a shy grin, and shook my head with a short laugh. Here I was, dressed in a t-shirt and jeans, and I just had to walk around campus with my fancy necklace on. Honestly, I kind of felt like a dork who didn't know that that necklace only belonged at an old-fashioned cocktail party. Oh, well. These new friends I had didn't seem to care about that. Lyn was just ecstatic that I had such a lovely gem on my neck.

"Hey, the new kid got one too!" I opened my eyes fully and saw Blaize standing right there, staring at my eyes in that annoying way all people had pretty much mastered. "What do you want?" Terri demanded, and her dark brown eyes flared viciously. Ian stepped forward to help protect me from them. "Not everyone gets one," Blaize said with an exasperated tone. "*She's* probably special if she has one. Probably good enough for us." "Keep your paws off her, Blaize," Lyn said firmly. "She's not like you."

Even though she was about four inches shorter than the three people in front of her, Blaize brushed past them and flashed me a cocky smile. "Hey," she said smoothly. "I'm Blaize Thayer. And you are?"

"Merina Davis," I replied with a smile. My attachment to Lily stopped me from being all-out friendly with her. Then I noticed it. The jewel around her neck that gleamed in the sunlight. It was bound by a simple black, velvet ribbon. "Where did you get yours?" I asked. It looked different, but our jewels looked like they had been made in the same place.

"*She* gave it to me," Blaize said, flipping a hand back. "Said something about sisterhood and sent me off to live in this school."

In Blaize's emerald green eyes, I saw a fighting spirit, someone who would be willing to stand up for herself if necessary. "My mom shoved me off on this place," I replied casually. Ian was staring at me with a warning look in his eye, and Terri had her arms crossed over her chest. Obviously, interacting with this group was not a good way to keep my friends, but Blaize's jewel had me interested. "Too bad for you," she snickered, and then motioned toward her two friends. "This is Eric and Brianna." Both stepped forward to shake my hand, and Brianna gave me a warm smile.

"Glad to see they finally brought in someone new," Brianna whispered to Eric, and I decided to disregard that. Now that Blaize's friends had been introduced, I noticed that both of them were wearing jewels, although they had different colors. Brianna's was an icy blue, worn on a choker like the one Blaize had, and Eric's emerald green gem hung on a thin black cord over his white button-down shirt. Being so close to those honey-colored eyes had me just a little unnerved, but I remembered Ian. I had promised him that I would go to the dance with him, and promises weren't made to be broken.

My eyes darted between the three of them. Honestly, Blaize and Brianna's multi-colored hair didn't seem so freaky up close. At least on the surface, they seemed like nice people. Even Eric managed a friendly, almost inviting smile that was directed toward me. Then he noticed Lily, standing a few feet behind me, her eyes trained on the ground. "Hey, Lil," he said with a grin, advancing toward her. "Get away from her you creep," Ian hissed, and I saw him fly at the other guy. Despite his smaller frame, Ian was on top of Eric, hands planted on his rival's chest.

"Cool it," Brianna said calmly, her ice-blue eyes hardening to show just how serious she was. "Eric didn't mean anything by that. Just saying a friendly hi." Lily backed off, horrified.

"You....you hurt me more than anyone ever has before," she squeaked, and I thought I saw true contrition flash through Eric's eyes.

"It's not what you think. Lily," he said softly, and tried to grasp her shoulders before she took off at a full sprint toward the residential complex.

"Sorry," Eric said, putting a hand on the back of his head.

"You've done enough," Lyn snapped, and everyone walked away in a huff.

Brianna looked at me for a while, and I could see that her blue eyes were softening once more. "We didn't mean to scare her off," she said. "Things happened last year, and....maybe she just wasn't ready to face them."

"Sorry, Eric," Blaize said, letting her tough exterior fall away for a little bit. "I know it took you a while to work up the nerve and everything, but..."

"It's okay," he said, shaking his head. "I just think it's time we both moved on." For all my times when I wished to be invisible, that moment was very awkward. If they had been paying attention to me, they probably wouldn't have been acting like that in front of me.

"So, what're you going to do? Just stand there?" Oh, yippee. Blaize was back to her sarcastic self

as of an official three minutes ago according to my watch.

"I don't know," I stated, falling into that trance I had become somewhat used to. A whole day without much real human interaction does that to you.

"What's with the Reimann kid?" she continued. "He thought we were going to hurt you, and he just jumps up like some puppy dog."

"You mean Ian?" I stated flatly. Things were getting through to my brain, and possibly even registering, but I couldn't string my words together to form coherent thoughts.

Eric had his arms crossed over his chest, staring right through me in the disconcerting way of his. And that's saying something. When you hear voices for about a day nonstop, it takes a lot to freak you out. His eyes were like dark, molten gold, so deep that I could get *lost* in there. Maybe he was able to read my mind, like the people from comic books. Brianna had a puzzled look on her face while everyone looked at me, imposing a rather awkward silence. "I think we should take her back to the dorms," she said after exchanging a look with Eric. He nodded, and made to help guide me to the "residential complex", as Diana had called it.

At that moment, when he put a hand on my shoulder, I felt a flash run across my eyes, and voices galore started screaming at me aloud. "Stop it," I hissed through gritted teeth, bewildered at the same time that something so trivial as a tap on the shoulder. White blurred my vision until that was all I saw. Then, I saw the inside of a small, middle-class home that looked like it belonged somewhere in New England.

I was standing in the middle of the hallway, staring at the pictures on the wall. One was most clearly Eric's senior picture. He was a smiling, attractive boy. Callie would have had her eyes trained on him if he lived in my hometown. Suddenly, something slammed against a wall, and I rushed upstairs. It was right behind that door, I knew it. Ever so slowly, I turned the handle, and saw Eric panting while he stood over his bed, his fingernails digging into the covers like vicious claws.

"Can't stop..." he panted heavily, and I heard the deathly rasp in his voice. "Why the hell is this such a high!" Then he picked up a book and threw it against the wall, collapsing onto his knees with his face buried in the sheets. His whole body was shaking, and I saw the wetness forming near his face. "What is it?" I asked. Out of respect for Ian, I wasn't ready to be entirely friendly toward him, but if someone was this upset, it seemed inhuman not to help them.

On the floor, I saw a picture of Brianna, smiling with her arms around Eric's neck. He looked altogether happy too, but I still didn't understand why he was so worked up *now*. "I can't find her," he whimpered. "It'll haunt me for the rest of my life." Then my vision flashed again, and I saw myself, slowly looking up. Strands of light brown hair slowly fell away to reveal my indigo eyes, and I felt all sorts of unfamiliar signals running through my brain. Clutching my head, I felt like I was fading out of this place.

The grass was soft and welcoming, and I blinked slowly. "You're definitely going back to your dorm," Blaize said. I was still hazy, but I felt someone--presumably Eric--lift me off the ground and then there was a slow rocking rhythm as they carried me.

"She sure screamed a lot. I hope she's not in pain because of something we did." Brianna.

"I can't believe we did this! What was the dog thinking!" Blaize. And then there was a long sentence that flowed along beautifully, almost like a lullaby. It sounded like words, but I couldn't decipher them.

Something warm was pressed against my cheek, and I snuggled closer, embracing the comfort that I hadn't had for a couple days. The voices became a dull murmur, and I found myself sort of floating in nothing. I was barely aware of what was going on around me anymore. Sweet silence enveloped me, and I felt a longing to stay here, my head resting against that warmth. I didn't want to like being around these people. To tell the truth, I was leery about them through and through. Being with this crowd felt right, though.

"Let's take her to the hideout tonight," Brianna said, and I was surprised that I could even hear what she was saying. My mind was slowly coming to, and the rhythm at which I was gently bouncing up and down got faster. "What if someone sees her like this? They'll ask questions."

"It'll all be okay," Blaize said, and I was surprised to hear the concern in her voice.

"Why?" I asked, lost in my daze. "Why do this for me?" A light chuckle shook Eric's chest, and I withdrew into myself, realizing that I might have been making him uncomfortable.

"We'll explain it when we get there," Blaize said, her breathing slow and shallow.

Voices started up in my head again, and I tried to sort through them. "Another C on my math quiz. My parents are gonna kill me."

"I wonder if she'll come with me to the dance?"

"Who's the new girl? What right does she have to get all cozy when they don't want me?"

"Maybe she's from a rich family or something. Probably spoiled rotten."

"I can't wait 'till the dance. Emily's going to be so much fun!"

My head started throbbing, and I sank down. Those strong arms were still wrapped around me, though, as I curled into a little ball. Wasn't he getting tired of carrying me around?

"What's wrong with her?" Blaize asked. "Are you picking anything up, Eric?"

"Just a lot of pain," he said sadly, stroking my back as I shuddered, clutching my head. More and more voices were creeping in, and they made my head throb. The pain from last night started to set in, and I was shaking uncontrollably.

"Tell me what's wrong. Please. You're so confused that I can't pick anything apart. Just....tell me what's wrong." This voice was quiet, but it was a man's voice, soft and sweet as chocolate. I wanted to indulge this one, but in a way unlike the shade's voice. She left me awestruck, making me fear what would happen if I was robbed of that musical beauty. This voice was beautiful in a more subtle way. I heard it, and it sounded like it could be my best friend's voice. I *wanted* to oblige this voice.

"I don't know," I choked, pain racking my body. Slowly, I looked down at my forearms, the stains from the blood that had been spilt. Ice blue eyes were staring into mine, and I squeezed my eyes shut. No matter what, I didn't want something bad to happen to people who wanted to be my friends. "Go away," I said, my voice strained with the torture as I writhed in Eric's arms. "I put my own friends....I....hurt..."

None of them listened, and I full-out sobbed, trembling like a two year-old who has had a terrible nightmare. "Shhh," came that voice again, and a hand wiped the tears from my cheeks. I fought hard to contain whatever it was in me that could hurt people. A fresh wave of pain hit me right in the face, and I opened my eyes. Tiny cuts made my forearms look like lattice pie.

"Go away," I urged, my voice quivering. "Don't want...hurt....hospitals..."

"Sleep," my voice urged, my best friend. However, the more he talked to me, the more I listened for that

special voice, and the more I opened myself up to let more in.

Something cold was pressed against my forearm, and the pain went away, although it was still sore. I gasped for breath, focusing on Brianna's eyes, their icy calm almost frightening. "What happened?" she asked, sounding totally exhausted from my little episode.

"You'll think I'm crazy," I warned, shrinking into my familiar warmth. I didn't identify it with Eric, but with comfort, with peace, with....well, warmth.

"Trust me," Blaize assured me with a short laugh. "We're pretty familiar with crazy."

"No," I said. Eric propped me up, and I realized that all the pain came back when I tried to move. "You really know how to thrash around," he said, laughing at me lightly. "Made it a difficult run down here."

"You still haven't told me why you did this for me," I pouted, trying to divert the subject from myself. "You have a lot of explaining to do."

"If you don't want to be beat for the next week, you'll shut up," Brianna commented coldly. "I put some ice on the wounds, but I still don't think they'll heal all that easily--ice just takes away the pain. You might want to get someone to help you with some makeup after you take a shower, though."

I looked at them, then at the criss-cross cuts on my forearms. Pushing up my sleeves, I saw that they went all the way up my arms. A worried look crossed Brianna's face, and Blaize was doing her best not to react. "I think they might have gotten everywhere," Eric said. "You got all cold, like you were dying or something. Do you....feel okay?"

"Not really," I admitted, and decided to leave my sleeve where it was. Living through it the second time was bad, but not as unbearable as the first time.

"Take off your shirt," Blaize said, her steadfast, tough attitude shining through once more.

"But...." I opened my mouth to protest, but Blaize placed a hand over it.

"I know," she said quickly. "Eric. We have to make sure you won't bleed to death tomorrow, though, and if he puts you down....I have a feeling it'll be painful." It wasn't just that Eric was there. I felt kind of insecure showing my too skinny, willowy frame to these three should-be supermodels. Blaize was probably a curvy size three at five foot two, and Brianna, at a little over five-seven, looked like some sort of ice faerie. Eric was....well, gorgeous, but I didn't know what to think of him anymore.

I slipped out of my brown t-shirt and felt exposed with my shapeless hips and nearly nonexistent bust. Brianna smiled at me, but she didn't come very close. "You're all cut up, girl," Blaize announced, tracing the cuts on my back. Each touch felt like a thousand needles in my skin. How was I going to sleep?

"Same on the front," Eric affirmed, and I blushed red hot after realizing that he was looking at me this closely. Most of the time, strange guys passed over me for the curvier, shorter girls.

"Quit worrying about it," Blaize said with a playful smile. "We all know Eric's head-over-heels for the Fredericks girl, Lily." At Lily's mention, Eric looked away and loosened his grip on me.

"Ian told me you abandoned her," I said with a hint of venom in my voice.

"Relax," Brianna said in her calming way. "You'll make the pain worse."

"I don't care!" I shouted. "How can you even dream of hurting someone like that! She's scared every time you come around and--"

"Shut up," Eric hissed, and I think he would have thrown me on the ground if not for the look that Blaize

had fixed on him.

"Why carry me off here?" I asked vehemently, catching my rage. "Why are you going to all this trouble for a complete stranger? What are you...superheroes?" Blaize broke my fit by bursting into laughter.

"Yeah, I guess you could call us that," she said between laughs. "Oh, man, no one's ever been so close to the truth!"

"Didn't you ever wonder about that jewel you got?" Eric asked, as if I'd been totally oblivious to everything. Honestly, I had just guessed superheroes because Kara had always read comic books about superheroes who just ran around saving people in distress.

"No," I said flatly, maintaining my fury. "When you hear voices., you--oh crap!"

"You what?" Brianna asked, and her big, ice-blue eyes got even wider.

"And I thought we were weird," Blaize commented sarcastically. I wanted to say something, but I felt my throat close up. I hadn't had anything to drink all day, and here I was like some sort of baby. How would they move me back before dawn? If I went missing in a school like this, I would surely get in trouble.

Underneath my head, Eric's chest heaved in a sigh, and I tried to move my arm. That resulted in a surge of pain as several cuts were stretched open again. I looked at Eric's shirt and realized that he had blood all over it, but his dark green gem hadn't been stained at all. "What about you, Eric?" I asked.

"Granted I don't know you, but I've heard nasty stuff about you. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't believe it."

"People make mistakes," He said with a sad laugh. "They get preoccupied, and then it hits the fan."

"I don't want her to hate me. I want to know that she's okay." I gasped silently. It was my voice, my new best friend.

"Don't worry about the things you hear about people here," Blaize said, flipping her hand as if she was throwing all those worries away. "Half of what you hear is BS, whether it comes from a friend or a rival." She sat down next to Eric, braiding my hair slowly. "Just know that we're here to help you if you need us."

"Yvonne Blaize Thayer, stop getting so sentimental on me," Eric mock-pleaded. "I don't think I can take it."

"Use that part of my name again and I'll throttle you!" Blaize hissed, and I felt her tie something around my braid. Eric smiled at her and then shook his head. I looked up for a moment and met those golden eyes. That look of concern sent me spinning through the clouds, but I still disliked the young man behind them.

"Sleep," Eric urged me. "You look like you need it." Blaize whispered something to Brianna, Brianna nodded, and the two took off in opposite directions.

"You're a guy," I snapped. "What do you know about TLC?"

"I know that you look like hell right now, and it'd be better if you just slept." He drew me closer, letting me snuggle into him like I had before. I had no desire to be near to someone who had hurt my friend, but that would mean leaving my warmth and my shelter.

"When I sleep, I feel pain," I said in a hushed whisper. "It's more pain than you will ever be able to imagine. I don't know why, but I hear people talking and then it's like I'm in the middle of a mob."

"My mom's a nurse," Eric said, and I smiled. In the past, most nurses had been very good to me. "I've

learned that the human body doesn't do very well if it's not rested." And then, he began to sing softly. He wasn't great, but it was soft and soothing, and distracted me from the voices. Ever so slowly, I drifted off to sleep, dreaming that I was back at home, laughing with my best friends in the whole world....