



# Angels in the Dark

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy

**Description:** A 50+ page collection of intense moments and amazing insights from the dangerously romantic world of the Fallen series. A party that goes terribly wrong, Arriane on a heavenly shopping spree, Daniel navigating the streets of L.A., Miles taking a step into darkness, an uncomfortable scene at Shoreline, an angel on the hunt, and a deleted scene of a date between Luce and Daniel make up this digital collection, offering a unique glimpse into the world of Fallen, a must for any fan of Lauren Kate. Includes a preview chapter of Lauren Kate's newest novel, *Teardrop*.

**Total Pages (Source):** 13

# Page 1

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## WHAT HAPPENED TO TREVOR

Luce eased the motorcycle to a stop in front of the lake house.

She was in love. With the bike: It was a gold 1986 Honda Shadow, and it was beautiful.

Her classmate mad Rachel Allison, with her dyed-red hair and immaculate French, had grown up and still lived just a few miles north of their school, Dover Prep. So whenever Rachel's parents left town, most of their class—the in crowd, at least—turned out for the inevitable party.

This was Luce's first time.

When she'd clocked out after her shift at Pisani's Bike and Body Shop, Luce had had three texts from Callie: One with directions to the party. Another to let Luce know that Callie had borrowed her black flip-flops. And a third with a picture of Callie sipping a mai tai aboard one of Rachel's speedboats.

But it was the voice mail—no, the voice in the background of the voice mail Callie left—that convinced Luce to make an appearance.

Trevor Beckman saying: Tell Luce to hurry up and get here.

He was easily the coolest guy in their class. The cutest, too. Trevor was the basketball team captain, the homecoming king, and Luce's biology lab partner. He was also Rachel Allison's sometime boyfriend.

And yet: He wanted Luce to hurry up and get there.

Of course, Luce had a crush on Trevor. Who wouldn't have a crush on Trevor? Tall and strong and always laughing, with dark brown hair that matched his eyes—everything about the guy was crushable.

But it was the kind of crush Luce never planned on actually doing anything about. She didn't go after guys. She never had. It drove Callie crazy, but Luce was perfectly comfortable admiring Trevor and his muscles from afar. Much more comfortable than she was going to be walking into this party.

She cut the bike's engine and hopped off before anyone could see her and wonder how on earth she could afford a ride like that.

Luce couldn't afford it. She had it on loan for one night from the bike shop, where she'd been working part-time for the past six semesters just to be able to afford "incidentals" at Dover. Her room and board were covered, embarrassingly, by the school's one and only scholarship.

To preserve that scholarship, Luce had made it through three years of honors classes, keeping a straight-A average. Not to mention three years of keeping her weekly therapy sessions at Shady Pines a secret from everyone at school.

She probably would have made it through three years without ever going to one of Rachel's famous parties if it hadn't been for Mr. Pisani's son. Joe was a few years older than Luce. Sexy in a dark sort of way. He'd always looked out for her, ever since she'd started working at the shop. He also knew she coveted the bike he'd resurrected from a heap of scrap metal. Just before Luce left for the night, he'd slipped the key into her palm.

"What's this?"

“I heard there’s some party tonight.” He smiled. “Don’t you need a ride out to the lake?”

At first, Luce shook her head. She couldn’t possibly. But then—

In three days, she’d fly home to spend the summer with her parents in Thunderbolt, Georgia, where things would be quiet and easy and comfortable. And boring.

Three whole months of very, very boring.

“Have fun.” Joe winked at Luce.

And then she took off. The feeling of riding a motorcycle, of the wind coursing over her face, of the speed, the thrill of it all, was familiar and yet like nothing else in the world.

It made her feel like she was flying.

When she crossed the tiki-torch-adorned threshold of the party, Luce spotted Callie standing near the water, surrounded by a circle of guys. She was wearing a red bikini top, Luce’s flip-flops, and a long white sarong.

“Finally!” she squealed when she saw Luce. Callie’s wet corkscrew curls bounced when she laughed. She must have just gone swimming, which Luce couldn’t imagine doing in the cold, black lake beyond them. Callie was the kind of fearless that meant she always found her way into a good time. She pulled Luce close and whispered, “Guess who just had the most gigantic fight?”

Trevor was walking toward them, holding a drink and wearing his basketball jersey and swim trunks. Behind him, a few feet away, Rachel’s face was ablaze.

“Perfect timing,” he said, smiling at Luce. His words came out a little slurred.

“Trevor!” Rachel bellowed. She looked very much like she wanted to trail after him, but she stood still, hands on her hips. “That’s it. I’m telling the bartender you’re cut off!”

Trevor stopped in front of Luce. “How ’bout a trip to the bar with me?”

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Callie gave Luce's back a shove just before she disappeared, and Luce was alone with Trevor Beckman.

Maybe she should have changed out of her greasy white T-shirt and cutoffs before showing up. Luce tugged at the elastic band to release the long braid she wore to work. She could feel Trevor's eyes on her dark, wavy hair, which flowed halfway down her back. "A drink sounds good."

Trevor smiled, leading the way toward the bar.

In the middle of the lawn, Rachel had gathered her minions around her. When Luce walked by with Trevor, Rachel tilted her head up and sniffed the air. "What smells like agasstation?"

"Eau de working class," answered Rachel's number two. Shawna Clip was just as mean as Rachel but not as smart.

"Sorry," Trevor said, pulling Luce away. "They're such bitches."

Luce's cheeks grew warm. She wasn't affected by Rachel's insults, but it was embarrassing that Trevor thought she might be. He stared at her for a moment, then steered her right past the bar. "On second thought, Rachel's dad keeps the cabins stocked with booze, too." He grinned at her and nodded toward the woods, toward the moonlit path that led to Lake Winnepesaukee. The tiki torches only went so far, and beyond that were just the big black woods.

Luce faltered. The woods were one of the reasons she avoided these parties. For

everyone else, the dark of night meant it was time to get crazy in a good way.

For Luce, it was when the shadows came out.

The bad kind of crazy.

But this was her first time one-on-one with Trevor when they weren't holding a scalpel and breathing in formaldehyde. She was not going to blow it by being the freaky girl who couldn't go near the woods.

"Through there?" Luce swallowed.

He ran his thumb along her cheek. It made her shiver. "It's only dark until you get to the clearing—and I'll hold your hand the whole time."

It was as good an offer as anyone could make, but Luce would never be able to explain to Trevor why it wasn't really good enough. Why she felt like she was walking into a nightmare she might not be able to wake up from. If the shadows were in there, they would find her. They would brush up against her like black sheets of ice. But she couldn't tell him that.

The dark closed in around them as they walked. Luce could sense murky things in the trees above their heads, could hear faint whooshes in the branches, but kept her eyes on the ground.

Until something pinched her shoulder. Something cold and sharp that made her jump—right into Trevor's arms.

"Nothing to be afraid of. See?"

Trevor started to turn her around, but Luce tugged on his hand. "Let's just get to the

cabin.”

When they made it to the clearing, the moon came mercifully back into sight. A neat little row of cabins stood before them.

Luce glanced at the woods but couldn’t see the way back to the party. She thought she heard the whooshing shadow in the trees again.

“Race you,” she said.

She took off toward the first cabin, Trevor close on her heels, until both of them collapsed at the door. They were laughing and out of breath. Luce’s heart raced from exertion and fear—and nervous anticipation about what they were doing so far away from everyone else.

Trevor reached into his pocket and pulled out a key.

The door creaked open and they stepped into the spare, clean cabin, which featured a fireplace, a small kitchen, and a very prominently placed king-sized bed. An hour ago, Luce never would have believed she’d be alone in a cabin with her crush of three whole years. She didn’t do things like this. She’d never done anything like this in her life.

Trevor moved straight to the wet bar and started to pour something brown from a frosted glass bottle. When he handed her the small, half-full tumbler, she didn’t even know enough not to take a giant swig.

“Whoa.” He laughed when she gagged. “Finally, someone who needs a drink as badly as me.”

If Luce hadn’t still been reeling from the burning in her throat, she might have



laughed and corrected his grammar, pointing out that what he meant to say was “someone who needs a drink as badly as I,” instead of what he had said—which meant she needed a drink as badly as she needed...him.

He took her empty glass and wrapped an arm around her waist, drawing her so close that his body pressed against hers. She could feel his muscular chest, the warmth of his skin.

“Rachel and I, we’re all wrong, you know?”

Oh God. She was supposed to feel bad about this, wasn’t she? He was going to kiss her and she was going to kiss him back and that would mean that her first kiss was going to be with someone who had a girlfriend. A terrible witch of a girlfriend, but still. Lucy did know that Trevor and Rachel were all wrong, but suddenly she also knew that Trevor was lying.

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Because he didn't know that. He was only saying it so she'd fool around with him. Because probably he knew she adored him. Probably he'd caught her watching him countless times over the years. He must have felt pretty certain that she wanted him.

She wanted him, yes, but until now it had always been in a far-off fantasy kind of way. Up close, she had no idea what to do with him.

Now his face hovered over hers and his lips weren't far away at all and his eyes looked different than they did in the yearbook picture Luce had gotten so used to.

And suddenly, she realized she didn't know him very well at all.

But she wanted to. At the very least, she wanted to know what it felt like to be kissed, really kissed, pushed up against a wall and kissed intensely, until she was dizzy, until she was so filled with passion that there wasn't any room for shadows or dark woods or a visit to the sanitarium.

"Luce? Are you okay?"

"Kiss me," she whispered.

It didn't feel quite right, but it was too late. Trevor's lips parted and came down on hers. She opened her mouth but found it hard to kiss him back. Her tongue felt all tied up. She was struggling in his arms as if in a dream, trying not to fight the kiss, trying just to take it in and let it happen.

Trevor's arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her to the bed. They sat down on the

edge, still kissing. Her eyes were closed, but then she opened them. Trevor was staring directly at her.

“What?” she asked nervously.

“Nothing. You’re just so...beautiful.”

She didn’t know what say to that, so she laughed.

Trevor started kissing her again, his lips wet against her mouth, then her neck. She waited for the spark, for the fireworks Callie had told her about.

But everything about kissing was different than she’d expected. She wasn’t sure how she felt about Trevor, his tongue on hers, his roving hands. But he seemed to know a lot more about this than she did. She tried to go with it.

She heard something and pulled away from Trevor to look around the room. “What was that?”

“What was what?” Trevor said, nibbling her earlobe.

Luce glanced at the paneled wooden walls, but they were bare. She studied the fireplace, which was dark and still. For a second she thought she saw something—an ember, a flicker of yellow and red—but then it was gone.

“Are you sure we’re alone?” she asked.

“Of course.” Trevor’s hands gripped the bottom of her shirt, inching it up and over her head. Before she could say anything, she was sitting on the bright blue comforter in just her bra.

“Whoa,” Trevor said, holding his hand over his eyes like he was staring into the sun.

“What?” Luce winced, feeling pale and a little embarrassed.

“Everything’s so bright all of a sudden,” Trevor said, blinking. “Isn’t it?”

Luce thought she knew what he meant. Like something between them was lighting up the whole room. Was this the spark she’d been waiting for? She felt warm and alive, but also a little bit too aware of her body. And how exposed it was.

It made her uncomfortable. When he leaned into her again, her insides felt like they were burning, like she’d swallowed something hot. Then the whole cabin warmed and grew way too light. It was getting hard to breathe, and she was suddenly, sharply dizzy, her vision burning bright as if the blood was rushing from her head. She couldn’t see a thing.

Trevor grabbed her waist, but she began to pull away. She heard noises again, and she was sure someone else was there in the cabin, but she couldn’t see anyone, could only hear a growing racket, like the rasping of a thousand saws against a thousand metal sheets. She tried to move but felt like she was stuck, Trevor’s arms tightening around her. They gripped her rib cage until she thought he might break her bones, until his skin felt like it was burning into her flesh, until—

Until he was gone.

Someone was shaking Luce’s shoulders.

It was Shawna Clip. She was screaming.

“What did you do, Lucinda?”

Luce blinked and shook her head. She was sitting outside in the smoky black night. Her throat stung and her skin felt raw and freezing cold.

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“Where’s Trevor?” she could hear herself murmur. The wind whipped through her hair. She reached up to brush the loose strands from her face and gasped when a whole lock of thick black hair seemed to slide right off her scalp. What landed in her palm was brittle and badly singed. She screamed.

Luce stumbled to her feet. Crossed her arms over her chest and looked around. Still the cool, dark woods, still the sense of the hovering black shadows, still the neat row of cabins—

The cabins were on fire.

The cabin where she swore she’d just been with Trevor—Had she? How far had they gone? What had happened?—was now engulfed in flames. The cabins to the left and the right were just starting to catch fire from the blaze in the middle. The night air reeked of sulfur.

The last thing she remembered was the kiss—

“What the hell did you do with my boyfriend?”

Rachel. She stood between Luce and the burning cabins, a bright red flush dotting her cheeks. The look in her eyes made Luce feel like a murderer.

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Shawna pointed at Luce. “I followed her. I thought I would catch the two of them screwing around”—she covered her face with her hands and sniffled—“but they went

inside, and then...the whole thing just exploded!”

Rachel’s face and her body went slack as she swiveled back toward the cabin and began to wail. The awful sound rose in the night.

It was only then that Luce realized, with a horrified clenching in her chest: Trevor was still inside.

Then the roof of the cabin caved in, spitting out a plume of smoke.

By then, the nearby cabins had really begun to burn, but Luce could feel a darkness hovering, huge and implacable. The shadows, once confined to the woods, now swirled directly above. So close she might have touched them. So close she could almost hear what they were whispering.

It sounded like her name, Luce, repeated a thousand times, circling her and then fading endlessly into some dark past.

## ARRIANE’S DAY OUT

“Wide load! Coming through!”

Arriane wheeled a large red shopping cart down the housewares aisle of the Savannah Salvation Army thrift store. Her thin arms gripped the handlebar as she heaved the heavy cart forward. She’d already loaded it up with two polka-dotted lamp shades, a sofa’s worth of tacky pillows, nine plastic Halloween lanterns filled with long-expired candy, half a dozen cheap patterned dresses, a few shoe boxes full of bumper stickers, and a pair of neon roller skates. So by this point it was difficult for Arriane, who stood scarcely five feet tall, to see where she was steering.

“Step aside, toots, unless you have no need for your toes. That’s right, I’m talking to

you. And your toddler.”

“Arriane,” Roland said calmly. He was one aisle over, flipping through a milk crate crammed with dusty vinyl records. His pin-striped blazer was unbuttoned, showing a Pink Floyd T-shirt underneath. His thick dreadlocks hung down slightly over his dark eyes. “You really know how to keep a low profile, don’t you?”

“Hey!” Arriane sounded wounded as she tried to maneuver her shopping cart in a hairpin turn and wheeled down Roland’s aisle. She stopped in front of him and jabbed an electric-blue-painted fingernail into his chest. “I take my work here seriously, pal. We have a lot of goods to procure in just two days.”

Arriane’s words seemed to remind her of something that filled her with sudden joy. Her pastel blue eyes ignited and a wide grin spread across her face. She gripped Roland’s arm and shook him, causing her long black hair to tumble from its messy bun. It flowed down to her waist and shimmered as she cried, “Two days! Two days! Our Lucy’s coming back to us in two freaking days!”

Roland chuckled. “You’re cute when you’re excited.”

“Then I must be the mayor of Adorableville right now!” Arriane leaned against a rack of old stereo equipment and sighed a happy little sigh. “I live for her arrivals. I mean, not in the same way Daniel does, obviously. But I do feel a certain speck of delight at the prospect of seeing her again.” She rested her head on Roland’s shoulder. “Do you think she’ll have changed?”

Roland was back to flipping through the box of records. Every third or fourth one he tossed into Arriane’s shopping cart. “She’s had a whole other life, Arri. Of course she’ll have changed a little bit.”

Arriane threw down the Sly and the Family Stone album she’d been examining. “But



she'll still be our Lucinda—”

“That does seem to be the pattern,” Roland said, giving Arriane the are-you-crazy look she got from most people—including everyone else at the thrift store—but not usually from Roland. “At least, it’s been that way for the past several thousand years. Why would you even have to ask?”

“Dunno.” Arriane shrugged. “I passed Miss Sophia in the office at Sword and Cross. She was hauling around all these boxes of files, muttering about ‘preparations.’ Like everything had to be perfect or something. I don’t want Luce to show up and be disappointed. Maybe she’ll be different, really different this time. You know how I feel about change.”

She peered into her shopping cart. The tacky pillows she’d thrown into it in case this Luce, like the last Luce, could be cheered up with a raging pillow fight—suddenly, they just looked ugly and childish to Arriane. And the roller skates? When were they ever going to use roller skates at a reform school? What was she thinking? She’d gotten carried away. Again.

Roland tweaked Arriane’s nose. “At the risk of sounding banal, I say just be yourself. Luce will love you. She always does. And if all else fails,” he said, sifting through the booty Arriane had tossed into the cart, “there’s always your secret weapon.” He held up the small plastic bag of drinking straws with paper umbrellas glued to them. “You should definitely bust out these guys.”

“You’re right. As usual.” Arriane smiled, patting Roland on the head. “I do throw a mean happy hour.” She slung her arm around his waist as the two of them wheeled the heavy cart down the aisle.

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As they walked, Roland looked down at the shopping list he'd made on his BlackBerry. "We got the party music. We got the decorations for your room, and the duct tape—"

"How you go through so much duct tape is one of the great mysteries of the universe."

"Anything else we need here before we go to the gourmet store?"

Arriane wrinkled her nose. "Gourmet store? But...Luce likes junk food."

"Don't shoot the messenger," Roland said. "Cam asked me to pick him up some caviar, a pound of figs, a few other things."

"Caviar? First of all, gag me. Second of all, what would Cam want with caviar? Wait a minute—"

She stopped short in the middle of the aisle, causing another shopper with a cartful of discount Christmas decorations to rear-end them. Arriane let the woman pass, then lowered her voice. "Cam's not going to try to seduce Luce again, is he?"

Roland went back to pushing the cart. He was excellent at keeping mum when he needed to, and it always pissed Arriane off.

"Roland." She wedged her black boot under the wheel of the shopping cart to stop it in its tracks. "Need I remind you of the disaster that was 1684? Not to mention the calamity Cam caused in 1515? And I know you remember what happened when he

tried to hit on her in—”

“You also know I try to stay out of all the drama.”

“Yeah,” Arriane muttered. “And yet you’re always there at the heart of it.”

He rolled his eyes and tried to push past Arriane. She held her ground. “I’m sorry, but courtly Cam is my nightmare. I much prefer him snarling and foaming at the mouth like the devil dog he is.” Arriane panted like a rabid dog for a moment, but when it didn’t get a laugh out of Roland, she crossed her arms over her chest. “And speaking of how utterly horrible your numero uno cohort is over there on the dark side, when are you going to come back to us, Ro?”

Roland didn’t miss a beat. “When I can believe in the cause.”

“Okay, Monsieur Anarchy. So that’s like...never?”

“No,” he said, “that’s like, wait and see. We just have to wait and see.”

They were passing the thrift store’s gardening aisle, whose wares included a tangled green hose, a stack of chipped terra-cotta pots, some used doormats, and a generic late-model leaf blower. But it was the large vase of white silk peonies that made both Arriane and Roland stop.

Arriane sighed. She didn’t like to get too sentimental—there were angels like Gabbe to do that—but this was one of those things about Daniel and Luce that always kind of touched her.

At least once in every lifetime, Daniel gave Luce a huge bouquet of flowers. They were always, without fail, white peonies. There must have been a story behind it: Why peonies instead of tulips or gladiolas? Why white instead of red or pink? But

even though some of the other angels speculated, Arriane realized that the specifics behind this tradition were not for her to know. She didn't know from love, other than what she saw in Luce and Daniel, but she enjoyed the ceremony. And the way Luce always seemed more touched by this gesture than by anything else Daniel did.

Arriane and Roland looked at each other. Like they were thinking the same thing.

Or were they? Why was Roland's face twitching? "Don't buy those for him, Arri."

"I would never buy those for him," Arriane said. "They're fake. It would totally defeat the purpose of the gesture. We have to get real ones. Big, huge, beautiful real ones, in a crystal vase with a ribbon, and then only when the time is right. We never know if it's going to come quickly or not. It could be weeks, months, before they get to that point—" She froze, eyeing Roland skeptically. "But you know all this. So why would you tell me not to get them? Roland—what do you know?"

"Nothing." His face twitched again.

"Roland Jebediah Sparks the Third."

"Nothing." He put up his hands in supplication.

"Tell me—"

"Nothing to tell."

"Do you want another Indian wingburn?" she threatened, grabbing on to the back of his neck and feeling around for his shoulder blade.

"Look," Roland said, flicking her away. "You worry about Luce and I worry about Daniel. That's the drill, that's always been the drill—"

“Screw your drill,” she said, pouting, and turned away from him to face a checkout attendant.

Arriane looked genuinely hurt, and if there was one thing Roland couldn't stand, it was hurting her. He let out a long, deep breath. “Thing is, I just don't know if Daniel's going to go for all the same patterns this time around. Maybe he doesn't want to do the peonies.”

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“Why not?” Arriane asked, and Roland started to answer, but her expression changed to something sad. She held up a hand for him to stop. “It’s wearing Daniel out, isn’t it?”

Arriane rarely felt stupid, but she did now, standing in the middle of the thrift store with her cart overflowing with goofy props and practical jokes. It wasn’t that the whole thing was a game to her—but it was different for the rest of them than it was for Daniel.

Arriane had started thinking about Luce’s...going away each lifetime as though her friend was just trucking off to summer camp while Arriane had to stay home. Luce would be back. Things would be boring in the meantime without her, but she would always come back.

But for Daniel—

His heart broke. It must have broken a little more every time. How could he stand it? Maybe, she realized, he couldn’t. And he had been abnormally low in this life. Had Daniel’s punishment finally gotten to a point where it had broken not just his heart, but all of him?

What if it had? The really sad part was, it wouldn’t matter. Everyone knew that Daniel still had to go on living. Still had to fall in love with Luce. Just like the rest of them still had to watch, gently nudging the lovebirds toward their inevitable climax.

It wasn’t like Daniel could do anything about it, so why not keep up with the good and sweet and loving parts of their story? Why not give Luce the peonies?

“He doesn’t want to love her this time,” Roland finally said.

“That’s blasphemy.”

“That’s Daniel,” they both said at the same time.

“Well, what are we supposed to do?” Arriane asked.

“Stick within our territory. Provide the earthly goods they need when they need them. And you provide the comic relief.”

Arriane shot him a look, but Roland shook his head. “I’m serious.”

“Serious about joking?”

“Serious that you have a role to play.” He tossed her a pink tutu from the clearance bin near the checkout line. Arriane fingered the thick tulle. She was still thinking about what it might mean for all of them if Daniel really resisted falling for Luce. If he somehow broke the cycle and they didn’t get together. But it gave her a really heavy feeling inside, like her heart was being dragged down to her feet.

In a matter of seconds, Arriane was tugging the tutu up over her jeans and pirouetting through the store. She bounded into a pair of sisters in matching muumuus, crashed into an easel advertising new linens, and nearly took out a display of candlesticks before Roland caught her in his arms. He twirled her around so the tutu flowed out around her tiny waist.

“You’re crazy,” he said.

“You love it,” Arriane responded dizzily.

“You know I do.” He smiled. “Come on, let’s pay for this stuff and get out of here. We have a lot to do before she gets here.”

Arriane nodded. A lot to do to make sure things were as they should be: Luce and Daniel, falling in love. With everyone around them holding out the hope that somehow, someday, she’d live through it.

## DANIEL IN L.A.

When the sun went down on skid row in L.A., a city of tents rose. One by one, until the throng of them got so thick you could barely drive a car down the street. Just a bunch of tattered nylon tents ripped off the back of a Walmart truck. And the other tents made out of nothing but a bedsheet thrown over a plank wedged into a milk crate. Whole families tucked inside.

The lost ended up there because they could sleep without freezing to death. And because, after dark, the cops left the place alone. Daniel ended up there because the seven thousand other transients made it easy to blend in.

And because skid row was the last place on earth he expected to find Luce.

He’d made a vow after the last life. Losing her like that: a brilliant blaze in the middle of a frozen lake. He couldn’t bear it. Couldn’t let her fall for him again. She deserved to love someone without paying for it with her life. And maybe she could. If only Daniel stayed away.

So there, downtown, along the grittiest street in the City of Angels, Daniel pitched his tent. He’d done it every night for the past three months, ever since Luce would have turned thirteen. Four whole years before he usually encountered her. That was how determined he was to break them out of their cycle.



There was nothing any lonelier or more depressing about skid row than any other home Daniel had made for himself over the years. But there was nothing worth romanticizing, either. He had his days free to wander the city, and at night he had a tent to zip up, shutting out the rest of the world. He had neighbors who kept to themselves. He had a system he could manage.

He'd long ago given up on the pursuit of happiness. Mischief had never held any real appeal, not like it did for so many of his fellow fallen angels. No; prevention—preventing Luce from loving him, from even knowing him in this life—that was his last and only goal.

He rarely flew anymore, and he did miss that. His wings wanted out. His shoulders itched almost all the time, and the skin of his back felt perpetually about to explode from the pressure. But it seemed too conspicuous to let them free—even at night, in the dark, and alone. Someone was always watching him, and he didn't want Arriane or Roland or even Gabbe to know where he was hiding out. He didn't want company at all.

But every once in a while he was supposed to check in with a member of the Scale. They were sort of like parole officers for the fallen. In the beginning, the Scale had mattered more. More angels out there to measure, more to nudge back toward their truest nature. Now that so few of them remained “up for grabs,” the Scale liked to keep a special eye on Daniel. All the meetings he'd had with them over the years added up to nothing but an enormous waste of time. Until the curse was broken, things were bound to remain this way: in limbo. But he'd been around long enough to know that if he didn't seek them out, they would come to him.

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At first he'd thought the new girl was one of them. Turned out she was something else entirely.

"Hey."

A voice outside his tent. Daniel unzipped the front panel and stuck his head outside. The sky at dusk was pink and smoggy. Another hot night on the row.

The girl was standing before him. She had on cutoffs and a worn white T-shirt. Her blond hair was stuffed into a thick bun on top of her head.

"I'm Shelby," she said.

Daniel stared at her. "And?"

"And you're the only other kid my age in this place. Or at least, the only kid my age who's not in the corner over there cooking crack." She pointed to a part of the street that flowed into a dark alley Daniel had never ventured down. "Just thought I'd introduce myself."

Daniel narrowed his eyes. If she were Scale, she would have had to make herself known. They appeared on earth in plain clothes, but they always announced themselves to the fallen. It was just one of the rules.

"Daniel," he finally said. He didn't come out of his tent.

"Aren't you friendly," she muttered under her breath. She looked annoyed, but she

didn't walk away. She just stood there staring down at him, shifting her weight and tugging at the frayed hems of her shorts. "Look, uh, Daniel, maybe this is going to sound weird, but I got a ride to this party tonight in the Valley. Was going to see if you wanted, uh—" She shrugged. "It might be fun."

Everything about this girl seemed just slightly larger than life. The square face, the high forehead, the green-flecked hazel eyes. Her voice rose above all the racket on the row. She looked tough enough to make it on the street, but then again, she also stuck out. Almost as much as Daniel did.

He was surprised to find that the more he stared at her, the more cause he had to stare. She looked so incredibly familiar. He must have noticed it the few times he'd seen her walking around before. But it wasn't until that moment that he figured out who Shelby reminded him of. Who she was the spitting image of.

Sem.

Before the Fall, he'd been one of Daniel's closest confidants. One of his very few true friends. Precocious and full of opinions, Semihazah was also honest and fiercely loyal. When the war began and so many of them left Heaven, Daniel had his hands full with Luce. Out of all the angels, Sem came closer than anyone to understanding Daniel's situation.

He had a similar weakness for love.

Gorgeous, hedonistic Sem could cast a spell over anyone he met. Especially the fairer sex. For a while, it seemed like every time Daniel saw Sem after the Fall, he had a different mortal girl on his wing.

Except the last time they'd seen each other. It was a few years ago. Daniel marked time by where Luce was in life, so he remembered Sem's visit as the summer before

she entered middle school. Daniel was spending his days in Quintana Roo when Semihazah showed up at his door alone.

A business call. Sem had the badge to prove it. A Scale scar. The gold insignia of the seven-pointed scar. They had gotten to him. They'd been after him for a while, and he said eventually he just got tired. Didn't Daniel ever get tired? he wanted to know.

It pained Daniel to see his friend so...reformed. Everything about him seemed smaller. Regulation-size. The fire inside him gone out.

Their meeting was graceless and tense. They spoke to each other like strangers. Daniel remembered feeling most angry that Sem hadn't even asked about Luce. When he took his leave, Sem was cursing, and Daniel knew he wouldn't be back. He would ask to be taken off the case. He would ask for someone easier.

Daniel had accepted that he might never see his friend again. Which was why he was so floored to realize who the girl was.

Standing before him on skid row was one of Semihazah's offspring. A daughter.

She must have had a mortal mother. Shelby was a Nephilim.

He stood to get a better look at her. She stiffened but didn't back away when he got up in her face. About fourteen. Pretty, but a handful. Like her father. Did she even know who—or what—she was? Her cheeks flushed as Daniel studied her.

“Um. Are you okay?” she asked.

“Where's this party?”

They spent an hour stuck in traffic in a van crammed with strangers. Daniel couldn't

have talked to Shelby even if he'd known what to say. Tell me about the father who abandoned you seemed like the wrong way to get started. When they finally made it over the hills into the vast, flat valley, the house they stopped in front of was dark. It didn't look like a party at all.

Daniel was wary. He'd been on the lookout for signs that this gathering was something more than mortal. A setup. A sign that Shelby was in one of the Nephilim circles he'd heard Roland talk about. Daniel had never paid much attention before.

The front door was unlocked, so Daniel followed Shelby, who followed the rest of the carload, inside. This was no celestial gathering. No, the people at this party looked lifeless.

They were passed out, making out, checking out, strewn across the couch and in heaps on the floor. The only light in the room came from a refrigerator being opened when somebody pulled out a beer. It was stuffy and hot, and something in the corner smelled rotten.

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Daniel didn't know why he'd come, what he was doing there, and it made him ache for Luce. He could fly away from here and go to her right now! The time they spent together was the only time in Daniel's whole existence when anything made sense.

Until Luce went out in a flash and everything went dark.

He kept forgetting his promise. To stay away this time. To let her live.

In the dark, disgusting living room, Daniel took a hard look at life without her, and he shuddered. If he'd had a way out, he would have taken it. But he didn't.

"This sucks." Shelby was standing at his side. She was shouting over the harsh, discordant music, and still Daniel could only read her lips. She jerked her head toward the back door. Daniel nodded, following her.

The backyard was small and fenced in, with scorched grass and patches of sandy dirt. They took a seat on the small cement ledge and Shelby cracked open a beer.

"Sorry I dragged you all the way out here for this shit show," she said, taking a swig, then passing the warm can to Daniel.

"You hang out with this crowd often?"

"First and last time," she said. "My mom and I, we move around a lot, so I don't really get to hang out with any crowd for too long."

"Good," Daniel said. "I mean, I don't think this is the kind of crowd you should be

spending your time with. What are you, fourteen?”

Shelby snorted. “Um, thanks for the unsolicited advice, Dad, but I can look out for myself. Years of practice.”

Daniel put down the beer can and looked up at the sky. One reason he liked L.A. was that you could never really see the stars. Tonight, though, he missed them.

“What about your parents?” he finally asked.

“Mom means well, she just works all the time. Or, all the time she’s not in between jobs. She has a special talent for getting herself fired. So we keep moving and she keeps promising that one day things are going to get ‘stable’ for us. I’ve had some problems, you know, adjusting. It’s kind of a long story....”

Shelby trailed off, like she thought she’d already said too much. The way she was avoiding his gaze made Daniel realize that she did know at least a little bit about her lineage.

“But Mom thinks she’s got the solution,” she went on, shaking her head. “She’s got this fancy school all picked out and everything. Talk about a pipe dream.”

“And your dad?”

“Skipped town before I was born. Real classy guy, huh?”

“He used to be,” Daniel said softly.

“What?”

Then—Daniel didn’t know why—he reached out and took Shelby’s hand. He didn’t

even know her, but he felt an urge to protect her. She was Sem's daughter, which made her strangely almost like Daniel's niece. She looked surprised when his fingers clasped hers, but she didn't pull away.

Daniel wanted to take her away from here. This was no place for a girl like Shelby. But at the same time, he knew it wasn't just this party or this town that was the problem. It was Shelby's whole life. She was totally screwed up. Because of Sem.

Just as Luce's lives had been screwed up because of Daniel.

He swallowed hard and suppressed a fierce new urge to go to Luce. He didn't belong here in this fenced-in yard. On this hot night, at this stupid party, with nothing to look forward to for the rest of eternity.

Now Shelby squeezed his hand. When he met her eyes, they looked different. Bigger. Softer. They looked like—

Uh-oh.

He pulled away and stood up quickly. Shelby thought he'd been making a move.

"Where are you going?" she said. "Did—did I do something wrong?"

"No." He sighed. "I did."

He wanted to clear things up, but he didn't know how. His eyes fixed on the busted screen door, where a dark shadow wobbled slightly in the stiff, hot wind.



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:33 am*

An Announcer.

Usually, Daniel ignored them. The past few years they'd started coming to him less and less. Maybe this one—maybe it had something to do with Shelby. Maybe he could show her instead of flailing for the words. He nodded at the Announcer and let it glide into his palm. A moment later he'd worked it into a flat black plane.

He could just begin to see the image coming clear: Luce. And he knew instantly that he'd made a big mistake. His wings burned and his heart ached as if it were breaking into pieces inside him. He didn't know where or when in time he was viewing her, but it didn't matter. It was all he could do not to dive inside and go after her. A single tear rolled down his cheek.

“What the—” Shelby's shocked tone broke Daniel's concentration.

But before Daniel could respond, a siren sounded on the street. Flashing lights illuminated the side of the house, then the blades of grass in the backyard. The Announcer splintered in Daniel's hands. Shelby scrambled to her feet. She was looking at Daniel like something had just clicked but she didn't have the words to express what it was.

Then the screen door whipped open behind them and a handful of kids from the party raced out.

“Cops,” one of them hissed at Shelby before they all dashed across the lawn toward the fence. They helped each other scramble over it and were gone.

A moment later, two cops jogged around the side of the house and stopped in front of Daniel and Shelby.

“Okay, kids, you’re coming with us.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. It wasn’t the first time he’d been booked. Dealing with the police always veered between a minor annoyance and a big joke. But Shelby wasn’t going in so easy.

“Oh yeah?” she cried. “On what grounds?”

“Breaking and entering a condemned residence. Illegal substance use. Underage drinking. Disturbing the peace. And somebody stole that shopping cart from Ralphs. Take your pick, sweetheart.”

At the station, Daniel waved to the two cops he knew and poured two cups of hot brown water from the coffeemaker, one for Shelby, one for himself. The girl looked nervous, but Daniel knew they didn’t have much to worry about. He was just about to plop down in the seat where the booking officer took your information, your personal items, and your mug shot when he noticed someone standing in the doorway of the station.

Sophia Bliss.

She was dressed in a smart black suit, with her silver hair spun into a tight twist. Her black heels clicked across the wood floor as she approached him. She ran her eyes over Shelby briefly, then turned to Daniel and smiled.

“Hello, dear,” she said. She turned to face the cops. “I’m the parole officer for this young man. What’s he in for?”

The cop handed over his report. Miss Sophia skimmed it quickly, clucking her tongue.

“Really, Daniel, theft of a shopping cart? And you knew this was your last violation before the court-mandated reform school. Oh, don’t give me that face,” she said, a weird smile pulling up the corners of her mouth. “You’ll like Sword and Cross. I promise.”

## MILES IN THE DARK

Miles had never meant to splinter off a second Lucinda.

One moment she had been a single girl in danger—his friend, a beautiful girl he’d kissed once, too, but that wasn’t the point—and then a second later, Miles’s eyes went cloudy and his heart pounded and before he knew what he was doing, he had thrown a mirror image of Luce right into the standoff with the Outcasts. Conjured her out of thin air and his deep feelings for her.

Two of her, suddenly. Both as gorgeous as a starry sky: dark jeans, dark shirts, two dark heads of hair. And there was such a dark look in Luce’s mirror image’s eyes when she took flight with the Outcast. And then—Miles pinched his own eyes shut at the memory—with one loosed silver arrow, the mirage image was gone.

Too soon after that, his friend, the real Luce, had disappeared, too.

He was such an idiot! The stupid words he’d said to her the first time they talked about his so-called talent would not stop running through his mind: It’s easy to do with the people you, like, love.

Did Luce remember their conversation that day on the deck at Shoreline? Was what he told her then one of the things that had sent her plunging into the Announcer all

alone?

She hadn't even looked back.

Now the yard was buzzing with the angels and their disbelief. Miles and Shelby were having a tough time grappling with what Luce had just done, but they'd seen her open Announcers. The angels, though, looked ready to keel over from shock.

Miles watched her so-called boyfriend as he worked through his own shock. His stupid mouth opened and closed silently. Daniel didn't know his girlfriend could do anything. He had no idea how very much she was capable of.

Miles turned away from them all and crossed his arms over his chest. It wouldn't do him any good to get angrier with Daniel Grigori. Luce was crazy about him. They had been in love forever. Miles couldn't compete with that.

He gave the dead grass a futile kick—and his foot bumped into something. It glinted in the dark.

## Page 10

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An unclaimed starshot.

No one was looking. The angels were huddled together, arguing about how to find Lucinda.

Miles felt wild and unhinged and not like himself at all, but suddenly he snatched the starshot from the ground and tucked it into the inside pocket of his brown corduroy coat.

“Miles, what are you doing?” Shelby’s whisper made him jump.

“Nothing!”

“Good.” She waved to him from behind the shed, out of view of the bickering angels.

“Then get over here and help me with this Announcer. It’s being a royal pain in the—Argh!”

The dark shadow pooled in her hands, completely unresponsive.

“Shelby!” Miles whispered as he jogged over. “Why are you doing that?”

“Why do you think, blockhead?”

Miles laughed under his breath at the fierce determination on her face. It wasn’t the Announcer; it was Shelby. She was terrible at stepping through but would die before she ever admitted it. It was kind of cute.

“You—you want to go after her?” he asked.

“Duh,” she said. “Are you with me? Or are you too scared?” She glared at Miles, then swallowed, changed her pitch, and took his hand. “Please don’t make me go alone.”

Miles took the Announcer off Shelby’s hands and struggled to expand it in the dark. Soon it opened up into an inky portal very much like the one Luce had just stepped through.

“I’m with you,” he said, and took Shelby’s hand. And together, they entered the darkness.

## INSIDE FRANCESCA’S OFFICE

Francesca was upset, and she wasn’t sure why. It was obvious in her short breaths and in the tense space behind her knees and in the incipient headache behind her eyes. She hated it when she was upset, hated being less than perfectly in control. But she wasn’t in control, and she didn’t know why. Certainly it wasn’t because of this callow new student.

When Roland Sparks had arrived at Shoreline, Francesca had not been surprised. Nearly all the fallen angels were on the move during the truce days, so it was only a matter of time before some of them came to her and Steven for help.

He sat before her desk now, in his starched white shirt, having just convinced Steven to allow him to “audit” some of their Nephilim classes. Ridiculous. If Roland wanted to spy on Lucinda, there were less obtrusive ways.

“You’re going to have to change your clothes,” she said to the fallen angel—or, as custom dictated he be called, demon—coolly. “Real students at Shoreline have never heard of an ironing board. Let alone...what are those?” She leaned down to eye his

boots.

His smile almost seemed to taunt her. “Ferragamo.”

“Ferragamo? Pick up a sweatshirt and some sneakers at the Salvation Army down the street.” She looked away and pointlessly shuffled her papers. No matter how long she’d lived with Stephen, demons always managed to unnerve her.

“Francesca.” Steven swiveled in his desk chair to lean toward her. “Don’t you want to talk about what happened today?”

“What’s there to talk about?” she said, closing her eyes to block out the image of her best students’ white faces when she and Steven had offered them a glimpse inside that dark Announcer. “It was a mistake to even try.”

“We took a chance. We were unlucky.” Steven rested a warm hand on hers. He was always warm, and she was always cold. Usually, that made her draw closer to him every chance she got. But today, his heat oppressed her, and his open affection in front of Roland Sparks embarrassed her. She flinched.

“Unlucky?” She scoffed. She could feel herself about to launch into a tirade about statistics and class safety and those Nephilim kids not being ready to play hardball—and while every word she spoke would be absolutely true, all three of them in that office knew that her rant was a foolish cover-up for their real concern that day. For the real reason she was so off her game.

Lucinda Price was ready.

And that terrified Francesca.

CAM GOES HUNTING

Cam leaned back against the redwood tree and slipped a cigarette from his silver case. At the edge of the forest, he was just out of view from the Shoreline deck, where the Nephilim were engaged in another one of their inane class projects. He could keep watch from here. He could protect her without her knowing it.



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A branch snapped behind him and Cam whirled around, fists clenched, the cigarette still clipped between his lips. Interesting. It was one of the females, alone. She hadn't sensed his presence on the other side of the tree. Her silver bow was not even drawn.

"Got a light, Outcast?"

The girl blinked her white eyes, which made Cam feel nauseated and almost a little bit sorry for her. Almost.

"The Outcasts do not play with fire," she said in a hollow voice, her pale fingers moving toward the inner pocket of her tan trench coat.

"Yes, that always was the Outcasts' problem, wasn't it?" Cam played it cool. No reason to alarm her. That would only draw the starshot faster. He snapped his fingers, igniting a small flame, and held it up to light the cigarette.

"You are spying on her." The girl jerked her blond head upward, toward the deck where—it was true—Lucinda was seated on a bench, looking striking in a rose-red sweater and her newly bleached hair. She was talking to some Nephilim friend, talking in the open, trusting way she used to talk to Cam. Her hazel eyes wide, her lips pursed with that old sadness. Cam could look at her all day.

Alas, he forced himself to turn back to the lifeless creature before him. "I'm protecting her from the likes of you," he spat. "There's a difference, baby, not that you'd be able to see it."

He stole another glance at Luce. She had risen from the bench. Her eyes traveled

down the deck stairs, which led too close to Cam's hideout in the woods. What was she doing? He stiffened. Was she coming over?

The starshot whizzed through the air when Cam was least expecting it. He sensed it at the last possible second and dodged to the right, scraping his cheek against the tree trunk, catching the shaft of the arrow in his leather-gloved hand. He was trembling, but he would not give the Outcast the satisfaction of knowing how close she had come. He pocketed the arrow.

"I'd use this to extinguish you," he said lightly, "but it would be a waste of a perfectly good starshot. Especially when it's so much more fun to beat you Outcasts up."

Before the girl could draw another arrow, Cam lunged at her and grabbed her by the ponytail. He kneed her in the stomach, hard, then jerked her head back and punched her sideways in the face. She cried out and something cracked, maybe the bone of her nose, but Cam kept punching, even as the blood began to flow—from her nose, from her lip, down his fist. From the moment he started whaling on the Outcast, he forced himself to tune out her girlish whimpers. Otherwise, he couldn't have gone on like that. The Outcasts were sexless, lifeless, worthless—but in spite of all that, they were a threat to everything that mattered most to Cam.

"You will"—punch—"not"—knee snap—"get her."

The Outcast gagged as she coughed up one of her teeth and spat blood across Cam's T-shirt.

"Spoken like someone who never even had a chance."

He punched her again, right in the eye. "I did. You hear that, Outcast? I may have lost it, but I used to have a chance."

Beating up the Outcasts was easy—too easy. It was a pointless exercise, like an old video game you'd bested but played again out of boredom. They'd heal like all the fallen, no matter how much damage he inflicted.

The Outcast grunted as Cam gave her skull a final kick that knocked her to the ground. She landed facedown in the mulchy leaves. After that, she did not move. So it was up to Cam to yank her to her feet and shove her bloodied body back from whence it had come.

"Tell your friends you are not welcome in this forest!" he shouted after her, watching as she tugged open an Announcer and fell inside.

He leaned back against the redwood and took a long, calming drag on his cigarette just as Lucinda started down the stairs.

#### LUCE AND DANIEL'S DATE

Luce looked around the quiet cave, surprised to find that the angels, demons, Outcasts, and the transeternals had all fallen fast asleep. The last thing she remembered was Dee's instruction to wait until the moon hit the Qayom Malakin precisely the right place before the ceremony of the three relics could begin.

What time was it? Rays of sunlight streamed through the mouth of the cave.

A warm hand squeezed her shoulder. She turned and her hair brushed Daniel's cheek. "By a stroke of luck we find ourselves alone," he laughed.

She grinned, whispered, "Let's get out of here."

They scrambled down the path, laughing like children, holding hands. When they rounded a curve on the path and found themselves looking out across a great vista of

the endless desert, Daniel swept her up in his arms again.

“I can’t keep my hands off you.”

Luce kissed him greedily, let her hands fondle the white expanse of his wings. Like Daniel, they were strong and awe-inspiring and absolutely gorgeous. They rippled with pleasure under her hand. Daniel shuddered, exhaled deeply.

“Do you want to fly somewhere?” he asked.

Luce always wanted to be in the air with Daniel. She grinned. “Sure. Wherever. I just want to be with you.”

He looked into the distance.

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“What’s wrong?”

“If it’s all the same to you,” he said, “it might be nice to stay on the ground. I have this urge to let go of who we are. Just be two people, a boy and a girl, hanging out.”

He eyed her nervously until she let go of his wing to take his hand.

“I know what you mean. I’d love to.”

Daniel looked grateful as he rolled his shoulders forward, coaxing his enormous wings back into his shoulders. They retreated slowly, smoothly, until they’d become two small white shoots in the back of his neck. Then they were gone completely and Daniel was merely Daniel. When he smiled, Luce realized how long it had been since she’d seen him without his wings.

“It’ll be nice to keep our feet on the ground,” she said, looking down at her boots and Daniel’s sneakers, both caked with desert dust.

Daniel was looking over her shoulder, down into the dry plain below. “Or maybe just slightly off the ground.”

“What do you mean?” She spun around and stood on tiptoes to see where he was looking.

“Have you ever ridden a camel?”

“I don’t know,” she challenged him. “Have I?”

They named the camel Woody, because he looked like a 1970s Woody Allen, with his red, wavy unkempt mane—though he was seven feet tall, with a double hump and two crooked front teeth. They found him grazing at the foothills of Mount Sinai with two other less amusing camels. When Daniel laid a hand on his flank, Woody didn't kick and snort at the invisible touch; he leaned in and nuzzled Luce's unseen face, looking lovably paranoid.

"This is the one," Daniel said.

"We can't just take him! What if he belongs to someone?"

Daniel raised a hand to shield his eyes and made a show of looking across the vast ocean of sand. "We're just borrowing him for the day." He wove his fingers together and bent down to make a step for Luce with his hands. "Come on. Up you go."

She laughed as she swung one leg over the camel, delighted by the feel of sliding down to the base of his back between his humps.

"How are you going to get up, normal boy?" she asked.

Daniel stared at the hump a foot over his head and scratched his chin. "Hadn't thought of that."

He asked for her hand and jerked himself up but lost his footing and landed on his back in the dirt.

"A temporary setback," he grunted.

For the second attempt, he came around the other side and tried to hoist himself up like a swimmer climbing out of the deep end. He slipped and fell on his face. Woody spat.

“Okay,” Luce called, trying not to laugh. “Third time’s the charm!” The first two times had charmed her, too, and a fourth would charm her even more.

Daniel grunted again, and when he reached for her hand, Luce really put her back into pulling him up. She could feel his body rising from the ground and was surprised by how light he felt in her arms. He landed behind her, directly on the hump, in the splits, and bellowed with pain. Luce lost it.

She was laughing so hard it required an apology, which was tough to accomplish through a delirious convulsion. Daniel finally laughed when her fit of giggles almost sent her tumbling off the camel.

When they finally calmed down, Luce turned to look at Daniel. She ran a finger across his lips. “It still feels like we’re flying.”

“I guess we always are.” Daniel kissed her finger, then her lips, and without coming up for air, gave Woody a gentle kick to get him moving.

Woody wasn’t a thoroughbred. They sauntered across the plain with the distant hope of reaching the ocean. It didn’t seem likely, but it also didn’t matter. Luce thought this endless stretch of packed brown sand looked like the most beautiful place on earth.

They rode in happy silence until something struck Luce. “I don’t think I ever have been on a camel before.”

“No.” She could hear the smile creep into his voice. “You haven’t. At least, not when I’ve been around. Were you able to pull that from the memories of your past?”

“I think so. It’s weird, I searched for it, but—recently when my mind circles around a memory and finds something I’ve done before, I feel this warmth.” She shrugged.

“Since I didn’t feel anything this time, I guess it means I haven’t had this experience before.”

“I’m impressed,” Daniel said. “Now how about you tell me about something for a change? Tell me about your time at Dover.”



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“Dover?” That caught her by surprise. She would rather talk about any of the past lives she’d visited in the Announcers than her experience at Dover.

They passed a barren tree trunk, which looked like it hadn’t seen a leaf in centuries. They passed a dried-up river and a dirt path that didn’t lead anywhere. There was no one around to judge her. Only Daniel.

“It was three years of boredom followed by one catastrophe that left a boy I knew dead,” she said finally. “It makes me sick to think about because I—”

“Trevor’s death wasn’t your fault.”

She swerved around to face him. “How did you know?”

“There was someone else behind it. Someone who knew you would feel terrible about that fire—and wanted you to. Someone who wanted you to believe that what happens inside you when you care for someone is fatal.”

“Who would do that?” Luce whispered.

“Someone who wanted you never to fall in love. Someone jealous of what you and I have together.”

“A person died because of that jealousy, Daniel. An innocent boy who had nothing to do with our curse or our love.”

“I didn’t know it was happening. I would have stopped it. I’m sorry, Luce. I know

you've suffered."

Luce rubbed her forehead. "You're saying the person behind Trevor's death killed him so that I wouldn't fall in love with you?"

"Yes."

"Only...it didn't work."

"No," Daniel said. "It didn't."

"Because of the curse? It still brought us together—"

"Because no curse is stronger than our love."

They climbed another mountain, then another. The sun beat down like hands upon their shoulders. They slid off Woody to walk to the edge of a cliff. The drop was steep and scary, but below them the ocean crashed against the shore, a fantastic bolt of blue after so much brown. They could never get down there without flying. But Luce looked at Daniel and Daniel looked at Luce, and they smiled, knowing they had made a pact: a simple date, no wings. That was fine with both of them.

"Come here." Daniel touched a flat rock at the edge of the cliff, motioning for Luce to sit down. They watched the ocean for a moment, saw two back container ships like glaciers near the horizon.

"It feels like the world is ours today, doesn't it?" Luce said sadly.

Daniel spun her to him, touched the tip of her nose with his. His hand parted the buttons on her jacket, then slipped under her shirt, caressing the small of her back.

He kissed her with a new brand of abandon. His touch was smooth and soft and

desperate all at once. Her mouth bore down on his as he squeezed her, lifting her on top of him, burying his free hand in her hair. Their limbs overlapped, taut with expectation. Their mouths were hot and tangled. Luce felt dizzy and alive, as if their souls had twined together. It was almost too much to bear. She could never get enough. But she would try.

“I love you, Daniel,” Luce said between breaths.

“I love you, too,” he replied. “More than anything. More than—”

Boom.

It sounded like thunder, the brewing of a dark tornado. Luce jumped awake inside the cave, where she must have fallen asleep on Daniel’s shoulder....