



Shadow of Doubt
by W.J. May

Part 1

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Prologue
Years ago...

The sun is rising, and I feel my death is imminent. I don't remember how the events unfold, but I understand the natural instinct inside of me. I need to find a phone, or I'll be killed. Fight or flight. I choose flight.

My breath shortens with my heart pumping at an agonizing rhythm. My lungs beg for more oxygen as my body tries to keep up with the demands I'm pushing. I don't want to die.

I can barely focus on my surroundings. Everything's a haze of dreary color, blurring past as I run. I round a corner and spot a red pay phone across the cobbled lane. Relief floods my terror. It's not my day to die. I push my body past exertion; my only focus, the phone booth.

The first rays of dawn begin to creep onto the ground, as if they're hands reaching out to grasp me. I collapse into the phone; my eyes close as I heave a sigh. Mercifully, I disappear...into the shadows.

Chapter 1

Erebus

Am I alive or dead? Maybe stuck somewhere in between. Nanny once, for about a week, ranted on and on about the middle life. For the life of me, I can't remember what all she said.

I feel weightless. I can't even feel my body.

The scariest thing: I don't know how long I've been in this state. It could be minutes, hours.

What if it's been years?

Maybe I'm going crazy. Or worse, maybe I've already lost it.

Tightness claws at my chest. The panic is strangely familiar, but it terrorizes me nonetheless. It would be futile to scream. I'm trapped – forever.

I try to force in a lungful of air, but the sudden spinning inside my head means I'm going to pass out again.

I let myself drop in defeat, into the dark oblivion.

Erebus jolted awake moments later with his back resting against a pay phone. His breath shot in and out in short gasps. He still felt the panic deep inside him, but relief tasted better than the fear. He savoured it, trying to let it seep through his core. Slowly his heart began settling into its regular rhythm.

He glanced around and up at the sky. The absence of the sun indicated it was just past dusk. Reddish brick buildings and houses lined the streets. Square buildings with little history to them. Rubbing his chin, he realized he wasn't in England; the architecture was too American. It couldn't be New York City. Everything looked too quiet, too country, with not enough skyscrapers. Then he remembered. Well, at least he knew the city, if nothing else.

Ithaca.

Gingerly, he stood. Brushing the dirt off his pants, he felt his back pocket. Thank goodness.

His wallet was there. He checked his coat pocket as well; his phone rested neatly inside. He hadn't been mugged.

His fingers ran through his short hair as he tried to collect his thoughts. I've been out.

Asleep? Deep down he knew the truth but wasn't ready to face it.

Looking both ways, he crossed the road and headed towards the Starbucks. Nestled between two buildings, its quiet atmosphere was inviting. He needed coffee. It felt too early to do anything else.

As luck would have it, the Starbucks was empty except for the counter girl. The warm tones of brown and beige on the chairs and walls looked comfortable, safe. The aroma of coffee beans filled his nostrils. He glanced at the college artwork hanging on the walls and the large shop window at the front of the café. It would entertain him as he waited.

The waitress smiled and straightened her uniform after he ordered a double espresso and grand latte. He pulled out his wallet, a bundle of fifty dollar bills nestled neatly inside. He handed the cute, dark-haired girl a crisp bill, making sure to add a twenty dollar tip. Money could talk when he wanted silence.

Carrying the coffees, he headed toward a brown leather chair near the window. He spotted an abandoned newspaper along the way and tucked it under his arm. Settling into the seat, he checked the date on the paper. Friday, October 13. *No wonder I feel off.* He wasn't superstitious but it did feel slightly ironic.

He sighed. Maybe there'd be some kind of party tonight – booze and free entertainment, the benefits of living in a university town. Maybe it'd take his mind off things.

A young couple walked by outside, hand in hand. He glowered at their backs as an unusual stab of jealousy filled him. He would never have that. He'd tried, once, and it was the biggest mistake he'd ever made.

The couple disappeared around the corner, along with his thoughts of them. Fresh, cool air swept by as the door of the café opened. He ignored the new customer, picked up his latte, and cursed when the piping hot liquid spilled against his hand.

“How're you doing this evening, Erebus?”

He cringed as he set his mug down on the table beside his chair. He'd hated his name since the beginning of time, and his dislike for the man seemed equal at the moment.

“Hello, Janus.” He didn't glance at the man standing beside him.

“You all right?” The man moved to the leather chair and set something on the small table.

What am I supposed to say? I have no idea where I've been for the past twelve hours? I hate my life? "I'm fine. I feel like I just woke up."

Janus laughed as he dug into his vintage leather briefcase. He pulled out a wad of bills and pushed it towards Erebus. "Here's your money. Go have some fun tonight. It's autumn; isn't this your favorite time of year?"

"I don't need the money." He ignored Janus' question.

"Take it anyway. I'm not going to stand inside some damn coffee shop window with this in my hand. Take the money." Janus harrumphed as he shut his briefcase with his free hand. "I don't understand you. It's so... you're different from the others. If I didn't know you, I'd think you were depressed."

Erebus sighed as he reached over to grab the cash from Janus' outstretched hand. It was the only way to shut him up and make him go away. Janus wore his usual expensive suit, the dark looking sharp against his blue eyes and ghost-grey hair. Janus held his beige Burberry business coat neatly folded over his arm. Erebus wondered briefly if the check pattern inside the coat had faded from constant use.

"Are you?" Janus slipped the jacket back on before Erebus could double check. "I'm not depressed. I just don't need the money." *I don't want your money.*

"Try to spend it more frivolously this time. Loosen up a bit and have some fun. You've had a lifetime to practice, and still you suck at it." Janus straightened the belt on his coat. "I have a few others I need to meet up with. I'll see you again next Friday." He patted Erebus on the back near the shoulder. "By the way, Coty's looking for you."

Erebus stiffened when Janus touched him. He said nothing as Janus left Starbucks and disappeared around the corner. He stuffed the bills into his already full wallet. It barely folded shut now. Shoving it into his back pocket, it amazed him the thing still fit.

Exhaling noisily, he turned his attention to the front page of the paper lying on his lap, checking the top corner. It called for a seventy percent chance of rain tomorrow and the sun would be rising at 6:14 a.m.

He drank the rest of his latte and then shot the espresso down his throat. Though glad Janus had gone, a small part of him wished he'd stayed. He

wished he could find some inner peace – answers to the questions he never dared to ask. To find a way to erase the longing he couldn't explain.

“Not tonight.” He wasn't going to linger on the depressing unknown. Grabbing the empty cups, he dropped them off on the counter before going out the door.

Although dim outside, the dark felt comforting. Erebus decided to follow his feet – let them lead tonight.

He headed towards the university campus. Cornell's red buildings were always an inviting sight. The heat from the day's sun seemed to linger on the bricks for hours after it had become dark. The warmth covered holes inside him he never understood.

As Erebus passed a tall glass office building, he stopped momentarily. The streetlight behind shone extremely bright, giving the appearance of daytime. His eyes blended in with the color of the charcoal glass. He hated their odd, steel-grey color that set him apart from others. It didn't help he wore a charcoal shirt and blue jeans. They just brought more attention to his eye color. Irritated, he looked away and continued walking.

“Think about positive bits, enough of the loneliness and self-pity.” The phone in his jacket pocket began vibrating. He pulled it out and checked the screen. His buddy, Coty.

Before he could even utter a hello, Coty started yelling, “Bus! I need your help! Hurry!”

Erebus stopped mid-stride, one foot still dangling in the air. “What's going on?” There was panic in Coty's voice.

“I'm in serious trouble –”

“Again?” Erebus didn't mean to interrupt. He'd meant to keep the comment in his head. A quick laugh on the other end. “Yeah, I know. But seriously...”

Shuffling, and other strange noises, came through the line. Erebus resumed walking, his pace twice as fast as before. He had no clue where he needed to go but going somewhere fast seemed the right thing to do. “Coty?”

The line went quiet.

“Coty!” Horrible images of his friend kidnapped, mugged or worse, murdered, flashed through his mind.

“I'm...here,” Coty whispered, out of breath. “Where?” Erebus whispered

back.

“Pi Kappa Phi.”

“A Fraternity?” He stopped for a moment, unsure. Was Coty serious? No time to contemplate. Erebus changed direction, heading towards the other side of campus. He needed to cut over the pedestrian bridge. It would save time. As he jogged, phone snug against his ear, he imagined having to fight fifty frat boys to get to Coty. He hated confrontation of any kind but he knew he’d do it if he had to. “Coty, you still there?”

“Ridgewood Road. They’ve got me at the back of the house. This is gonna get me killed.” More muffled noises and shuffling echoed through the reception.

“I’m on my way.” He shut the phone, keeping it tight in his hand. Just last night, he’d bugged Coty for putting highlight tips in his hair and going to a damn tanning bed. Coty had argued it gave him a sandy-beach look and he picked up chicks better. Coty was all about image.

Erebus shook his head. Since then, he’d lost twelve hours and Coty lay in mortal danger. He pictured Coty’s hair matted with blood and bruises covering his friend’s body. He picked up his pace.

Loud music bounced off his chest and into his ears before he even turned onto Ridgewood Road. Drunken idiots having a party. Coty must’ve gotten himself into some serious shit. He’d probably slept with someone’s girlfriend or sister. Or probably both, at the same time. The guy had no morals.

Muffled music came first followed by the blur of the lights from the house which slowly came into focus. People congregating on the grass and front porch of the house solidified that Erebus had found the right house. Talking and laughter accompanied the crappy rap music. Heart pounding, he cut across the yard and bounded up the porch steps, taking two at a time. Shoving people out of the way, he earned dirty looks and rude comments. He didn’t care.

As he charged through the front door, Erebus felt a jolt that made him slow his pace. Out of the corner of his eye, he could’ve sworn he’d just seen an angel. Or something with wings.

Except that was impossible.

Chapter 2

Aurora

The jolt didn't come from what Erebus thought he'd just seen or from some deep inner realization. It was physical. Someone had grabbed his shoulder and was trying to pull him outside. He clenched his hand into a fist and drew his arm back, ready to hit the idiot trying to stop him.

Coty stood beside him, a stupid half-apologetic smile on his face. "It was the only way I could get—"

Erebus swung anyway, aiming for Coty's chin.

His friend must've been prepared for the punch. Coty casually leaned out of reach, grabbed Erebus' fist and locked his arm into Erebus' outstretched one. Then he pulled him forward so they bumped chests. Coty's infamous man-hug.

"You asshole!" Erebus shifted away, seething. Coty knew there were dangers to be aware of.

One day he'd call wolf and Erebus wouldn't be around to help him.

Coty laughed. "Come on. They've got three kegs in the kitchen. My treat."

"Your treat?" Despite being ticked, he laughed. "One of these days, mate... one of these days." Thankful to get out of the hall of staring people, Erebus stepped over a passed-out body on the steps leading upstairs. He made his way down the crowded hall towards the kitchen. The music pulsed inside his chest, but at least his breathing had gone back to its normal rhythm.

Glancing around, he wondered if he might be the only sober person. Coty had stopped to talk to twin girls. Erebus grinned and continued on.

Crossing the slightly less crowded kitchen, he opened the fridge door and leaned in. The blast of frigid air felt good on his sweat-soaked hair. He enjoyed it, momentarily. Pushing aside some black labelled bottles with green liquid, he grabbed two beers. He preferred cans over drinking straight from the kegs. A bunch of college guys were doing that just outside the kitchen's sliding doors and he had no intention of sharing their drinks now.

"Did you see any Mike-arita's in there?" A throaty, sensual voice asked from behind him. Instinctively, he closed his eyes. The girl had to be inches from his ear. There was no way he would've heard her above

the music if she wasn't. His nostrils flared as he slowly inhaled a faint scent of musky female perfume. It smelled luscious. He turned to see the body that exuded the aroma.

There in front of him stood the winged angel he had seen earlier and had momentarily forgotten with Coty's prank.

Well, whoever she was, she was dressed as an angel. Wearing a simple white blouse and a long, Battenberg lace skirt, she had a pair of feather wings darting out behind her. Her wavy blonde hair held gold tinsel weaved into a wreath shape accompanied with sparkly glitter. She was angelic, even without the costume. She looked young, innocent. He wondered why she was the only one at the party dressed in a costume but was too mesmerized to ask.

His heart pounded louder than the music. His eyes traveled from her gold Converse sneakers, up a shapely pair of legs, to slender hips. His gaze hesitated over her lovely, small perky breasts and then slowly up her neck to her face.

He swallowed when his gaze met her large blue-green eyes. Only a second spent in their endless pools seemed like an eternity of bliss. They reminded him of the ocean at night, when the moon was full and one could really see the color of the water. She stared just as intently back into his eyes. He knew he must have some weird expression on his face. The questioning look on hers became more pronounced when she raised her eyebrows. He noticed a small, light scar above her right brow.

Breathe, idiot! Breathe! Stop staring. A startled noise escaped his mouth when he finally sucked oxygen back into his lungs. Thankfully, the music drowned it out.

"Sorry, what did you say?" he shouted above the noise. Had it only been a moment ago that she'd said something to him?

"Mike-arita. It's like a Mike's Hard Lemonade but Margarita-style." She shrugged her shoulders and grinned.

"I think I saw two." He smiled back at the goddess. "Here, hold these and I'll grab them for you." He handed her the beer cans, then turned back to the fridge. His head spinning, he wondered if he could be drunk without drinking any alcohol. It suddenly felt like it. He grabbed the two glass bottles full of green liquid with one hand.

He turned back to see if the angel was a mirage. Miraculously, she still stood there holding his beers.

Without speaking, he followed her out into the hall. His gaze traveled down her hair, her wings, pausing over her beautiful round derriere. She was stunning from the front and the back.

The crowd lingered in the hallway. As they passed the front door, there was a small break in the bodies. She stopped pushing forward and turned around to face him.

“Thanks for grabbing the drinks for me. I’m Aurora.” She put one can of beer on top of the other and held out her hand.

Aurora. Pretty name. Different. He grinned like a schoolboy. “Hi. I’m Erebus.” His name was muffled by the blaring of a new song through the stereo speakers.

“Aaron Bus? It’s nice to meet you, Aaron.” She raised the corners of her mouth.

He didn’t correct her. He was too busy wondering how her eyes could lighten in color from a simple smile.

She said something else, but he couldn’t hear her over the noise.

“Pardon?” Erebus shouted. He leaned in to bring his ear closer to her mouth. He could feel her warm breath against his neck and ear. It felt wonderfully erotic.

“My friends are outside. Want to come?”

He turned to answer back, their noses brushing as she turned to bring her ear towards him. He watched her bite her lip—intoxicated by her actions, her smell, and her warmth. It had been so long since he’d had these feelings they almost felt foreign. Could it just be physical attraction?

“My buddy’s...” He glanced around and caught sight of Coty, one eyebrow raised, leaning against the banister halfway up the curved stairs. Erebus bent forward, his lips lightly brushing her earlobe. “I’ll meet you outside in a moment. Let me hand my friend his beer.” He carefully took them from her hand and then purposely brushed against her body as he passed by. Her warmth lingered as he stood on the bottom step. From his peripheral vision, his angel slipped outside.

“Coty!” Erebus shouted and tossed a can directly at him.

Coty turned and caught it without hesitating. He brought his fingers to his eyebrow in a mock salute of thanks. Before he let Coty holler something back, Erebus turned and headed towards the front door.

Aurora. He liked the way her mouth had gone into a pucker when she'd said her name. As he made his way to the front door, he imagined whispering her name just before letting his lips meet hers. He could almost taste her.

He blinked to clear his ridiculous thoughts. He'd never been this captivated by a woman before. It was the weirdest—almost terrifying—feeling he'd ever had. How could he be mesmerized this easily if it'd never happened to him before?

Once outside, the fresh air seemed to waft some sense back into him. He handed his beer to a grateful-looking guy standing on the porch. Not finding Aurora on the porch, he apprehensively gazed across the lawn.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw her standing by a streetlamp. He bounded down the steps.

“Hey...Here you are.” Out of habit, he ran his fingers through his hair. He watched her eyes follow his hand, then travel down and linger as she met his gaze and held it. He blinked and glanced towards the street, staring at nothing.

“Your eyes, they're very unusual.”

He shrugged, embarrassed she'd noticed their strange color. “Where're your friends?” “They just left.” Her turn to shrug.

“Without you?”

“Yeah, I was sort of waiting for you.” She grinned, not even embarrassed. It was a beautiful smile which lightened her pretty face.

“Oh no. I don't have a car to take you home. I don't own one.”

“That's okay. I'll catch a cab back to my place in a bit. I just wanted to chat without having to shout above the music.”

“True. Do you go here?” He hadn't seen her around before.

“I do.” She raised a hand. “I started this year. I'm in my first year Juris Doctor.” “You're going to be a lawyer?”

She laughed. “That's the plan.”

Wow. Pretty and smart. He pointed to her halo and wings. “May I ask, why the outfit? Or is it your job when not attending class?” Probably made real angels jealous. His eyes travelled from her hair to where her top met skin.

“LOL. Nada. I lost a bet. A friend and I are taking an ancient mythology course. We made a bet. I lost.”

Erebus realized he was staring at her breasts. He quickly lowered his gaze to the lace on her skirt. He racked his brain. “Battenberg, right?”

“Yeah...” She gave him a questioning look.

Too strange to know in this day and age. He held up his hands, thinking fast. “I’m originally from England. It’s a long story.” He flashed her one of his innocent smiles – hopefully.

“Fair enough. I won’t ask.” She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “What about you? What’s your major?”

“I live here, but I’m not enrolled.”

She gave him another look but didn’t push it. She pointed towards the road. “Do you want to walk? I should probably start heading back to my apartment, or my roommate’s going to call Missing Persons.”

He chuckled at her comment and lack of fear, even if there was nothing to be afraid of. “Sure, which way do we need to go?” Erebus knew every street. He’d walked them all a thousand times.

“I live in an apartment off campus, but on the other side. Do you want to walk with me to University Ave? I’ll be able to catch a cab there.” She hit her forehead with the palm of her hand. “I’m sorry. I didn’t even ask where you live.”

“It’s fine. How about I walk with you to University? Then I’ll head back to my place.” He glanced around. “I like strolling after dark. Fewer people.”

They walked in silence for a few moments, the music from the frat house still keeping beat inside his chest – at least, that was his excuse for the hammering.

“Are you from around here?” He wanted to know everything about her but was afraid he sounded desperate or, worse, creepy.

“No. I grew up in San Antonio. The winter’s here are a lot colder, but I fell in love with the snow.” She shivered as they started on the suspension bridge above Falls Creek.

Erebus shrugged out of his leather jacket. Without a word, he carefully slipped it around Aurora’s cool shoulders, trying to avoid damaging her feathered wings. It felt like the most natural thing. He watched her inhale the scent from his jacket and close her eyes. It took all his strength to resist leaning in and kissing her. The attraction had to be magnetic. With this girl, this stranger, her physical attraction was something irresistible. He ignored

the warning bells going off in the back of his mind and took pleasure in the feeling.

“Did you know there’s a myth about this bridge?” His voice broke through the silence. “A myth?” Aurora’s forehead crinkled as her eyebrows went up.

“Yeah, the story goes: if a man and woman cross the bridge, and the woman doesn’t accept a kiss from her partner, the bridge collapses. If she does accept the kiss, they are assured a long life together.” Wanting so badly to kiss her, he kept his head down and tried to clear the longing away. He pressed his lips tight. He couldn’t believe he’d told her the stupid myth. “I read it online and in some book a while back.”

They were almost at the other side of the pedestrian crossing when Aurora stepped in front of him. “I guess, for the sake of mythology, you should kiss me. You know, to save the bridge from falling and all that.” She grinned.

“For the sake of the bridge.” He swallowed before whispering, “May I kiss you, Aurora?” He watched her stare at his mouth as if drawn by the same invisible force.

She mouthed the word “yes,” a small, warm breath escaping. Eager, he leaned forward, his hands reaching gently for the collar on his jacket she wore. He wanted to crush against her, his lips bruising hers as he forced her mouth open. Instead, like a breeze teasing the trees, his lips brushed ever-so-lightly against hers. He pulled slightly away, pausing before opening his eyes. Inhaling her delicious scent, he slowly lifted his head back.

“Mmmm...” was all he heard, or thought he had heard. He couldn’t be sure if the sound had come from her or from the water below.

He watched her face, a little dazed before confusion replaced it. Crap! He should have followed his instincts. It was the wrong kind of kiss.

She reached inside the jacket. He held his breath.

“Your phone’s vibrating.” She handed him his cell phone from the breast pocket.

He exhaled, took it and glanced at the caller ID. Groaning, he stuffed the phone in the back pocket of his jeans. “It’s just my buddy from the party. No rush to answer.”

“Do you want my number for your phone?” Aurora stared at the water rushing underneath the bridge.

“Definitely.” He pulled his phone back out, adding Aurora to his small contact list.

“My number’s five-one-seven-one-two-three-four.” She pulled her blackberry out. “Can I have yours?”

He watched as she typed Aaron Buss into her contact list. He rubbed his cheek to hide the smile as he told her his. He’d correct her next time they met.

They reached University Ave. just as a cab pulled over to let a couple of students out.

Erebus jogged over and had it wait for Aurora.

He held the rear door open for her as she stepped in. Sitting, she leaned forward to shrug out of his jacket and handed it back to him. Her wings popped perfectly back into place.

“Thanks. For everything,” she said.

He took the jacket, unsure of what to say or do and feeling a moment of panic she was leaving. He had the sudden fear he might never see her again. “Can I call you?”

“Definitely.” She winked, repeating his word from before. “Or, I’ll text you tomorrow.

G’night, Aaron.”

“’Night.” *She’s perfect.* Somewhere, in the back of his mind, a tiny voice added, *Perfect?*

Careful, Erebus. First impressions always are.

Chapter 3

Night Court

The following evening, Coty and Erebus sipped coffee at S'moes Diner. The confusion and grogginess had cleared and tonight Erebus had a hint of anticipation running through him.

S'moes Diner always helped him relax. The comfortable atmosphere in the silver RV-trailer restaurant, with its red leather seats and sparkly laminated retro table seemed to offer some kind of soothing, invisible toxin to Erebus.

“Did you head back to her place?” Coty laughed at a sudden thought. “Or yours? Did you— ” He chuckled again. “—end up in a phone booth?”

“Not funny. At all.” Erebus shook his head. “We just went for a walk and talked a bit.” “Did she ask why you can only come out when it's dark?” Coty asked.

“Yeah.” Erebus snorted. “She made some comment about me being a vampire.” He met her once and Coty assumed he slept with her and told her the one thing he couldn't ever explain to anyone?

“Vampire?” Coty straightened in his chair. “What is it with mortals? Why does anything that has to do with night always have to be a vampire? The way people think is so strange.”

“Sure and answering back that I'm a Shadow makes so much more sense.” Erebus set his empty mug down. “Not strange at all.” He barely knew the girl, like he was going to tell her his most intimate secret. “I was joking.”

“Better than a damn vampire,” Coty muttered. “Why can't people just be normal?” “Normal?”

“Well, sort of. Chicks dig vampires and there are some hot vampires on TV and on the big screen. But,” Coty shook his head, “that's not what I mean.”

Erebus cracked a couple of knuckles. Knowing Coty, this was heading on the side of ridiculous. “What *do* you mean?”

“You know, like, we've got some disease.” He snapped his fingers. “Like we're allergic to the sun.”

“Yeah, that's pretty normal.” He rolled his eyes and wished the waitress would bring more coffee. “You being tanned and not albino.”

Coty ignored Erebus' comments. "People do have Vitamin D deficiencies." A sly smile crept onto his face. "You know, I've used the 'medical condition' excuse before."

"Why doesn't that surprise me? Was it to get into a girl's pants?"

Coty smiled mischievously. "Why else use it? D'you want to hear the story?"

Erebus shook his head and closed his eyes. "One of these days, Coty, one of these days..." "What?"

"A human's going to change you."

"Nah, it won't happen." Coty opened his mouth as if to continue but stopped. Erebus knew what went unsaid. *He* was the strange one, so unlike the others.

"...and I've been around about fifty years longer than you. I'll stick to my motto of laughter, sex, and fun. In no particular order today; whatever happens first is fine with me."

Erebus waited for Coty to stop laughing. He leaned forward, resting his elbow on the table and rubbed his clean shaven face with his hand. "Have you ever, in all your hundred and fifty years, fallen in love with a mortal?"

"With a mortal?" Coty's smile disappeared. He shook his head. "I've never been in love.

Period. With a Shadow, or a human. Why would I? There are so many beautiful women to enjoy. Why complicate things and try to throw love into that?" He shrugged, then grinned, "I'm like Elvis, but without the tassels and jelly rolls. Like the King in his younger years. Man, wasn't he great back in the seventies? His female fans slept with anyone who looked like him. I even dyed my hair black back then."

Erebus sighed. Their kind was easy on the eyes, every single one of them. Coty wouldn't have a problem picking up chicks dressed in a clown's suit. "I'm not talking about how we look. Every Shadow appeals to the human eye. That's not important to me." He waved his hand dismissively in the air. "Don't you ever feel like something's missing?"

"What could be missing? We've got these perfect bodies, more money than we'll ever need, youth..." Coty pointed a finger at him. "Plus we've got life experience and knowledge. We can hang out with hot chicks and never get bored. On top of that, we've got talent in the bedroom no mortal

can match.” Coty shook his head and raised his eyebrows. “What could be missing?”

“Not everything is based on physical—”

“That’s all we are based on!” Coty interrupted. “We’re Shadows. Shallow, outlines of humans. There isn’t anything more. We all think this way.”

Erebus pressed his lips together. He wanted to argue that he didn’t feel the same but knew Coty wouldn’t get it.

He was right.

Coty grinned. “Think of how things were so restrictive sixty years ago. Shoot, I remember in the early nineteen hundreds, I had to play tricks for prostitutes; taught a few of them a thing or two in the process.” He winked before continuing. “Look how the women’s lib evolved and how good the sixties were to us. I can’t see things getting better than how they are now, and trust me, they will. We’re not missing out on anything.”

Erebus stared at his orange ceramic mug. How could he explain to Coty that it wasn’t enough? He hated his life. Existing by day as the Shadow he possessed. Coming to life only at night. He knew Coty understood fear. Every Shadow did. Every morning came the panic of not being able to find his Shadow. Then there was the disorientation every evening when he awoke back into human form. Always alone and being paid to keep quiet about what he and the others were. The answer seemed so simple. He wanted more.

He knew he was different than Coty, even Janus. In his hundred years, he’d never seen a Shadow the same as him, and he’d looked. Oh, he had met a similar Shadow to him, but had never found one with the same inner turmoil he suffered. He needed something more. He just didn’t know exactly what he was searching for.

He watched Coty lean back in his chair, oblivious, casually crossing an ankle on his knee.

He couldn’t even explain it to his only friend.

“You know,” Coty said suddenly and tilted his head slightly, “if all this is because of that chick, you’d better be careful. Don’t break The Code.”

“I’m not going to break any of our laws, and I know what The Code is.” He tried to keep the irritation out of his voice but was unsuccessful. The look of pity in Coty’s eyes just grated on him even more.

“Whatever. Then just get in the girl’s pants and leave it at that. Don’t think you can change things, ‘cause you can’t. We can’t control anything.” Coty waved his hands in front of his face. “We’re obscurities; that’s it.”

“I know.” Erebus let out a long breath.

Coty nodded and stood. “Listen, mate, I’m going to take off. Gotta meeting of the Night- Council-kind tonight.” He slipped his jacket on and paused by Erebus. “You know something? Maybe you’re right...”

“Right about what?” Erebus looked up.

“Maybe,” Coty shrugged, “we kind of are vampires. I know they aren’t real, but maybe the whole vampire thing started because of us. It wouldn’t surprise me. There’re a lot of similarities, when you think about it.” He headed towards the exit, dropping his mug off at the counter.

Erebus watched Coty pull out his phone and add the waitress’ number to it.

“Shoot,” he mumbled as he leaned over to grab his own cell phone out of his jacket pocket.

He’d forgotten to turn it on. He hit the button, drumming his fingers as he waited. There were five new texts, all from Aurora.

Hey. Just texting to see if I got the rite number. Lunch now... U busy tonight?

R U ignoring me? Don’t answer that. I won’t text again.

Sorry, I’m back. Only 2 say I won’t text again til I hear from U. It’s 9:30 going to Rum Jungle 2nite with friends. Meet me?

He checked his watch. It was just after ten. He hit the reply button on his phone then thought about what Coty had said. He hit delete and stuffed the phone into his pocket instead. Leaving his mug on the table, he ran outside after his buddy.

“What’s the meeting for?” He caught up to Coty a block from the coffee shop. He ignored the wind that reminded him he’d forgotten to close his coat. He left it open as a form of inner punishment.

Coty didn’t change his pace and kept staring ahead. “Not a hundred percent sure, actually. There’s a rumor a human knows about us and needs to be dealt with. Or, some new Shadow’s been screwing up royally and needs to be taught a few things in manners.” Coty cleared his throat. “I’m just going for the entertainment.”

Janus hadn't told him about the meeting. "Whatever. You're just like me. You don't go to these things unless you've been summoned. What're you witness to?" Erebus felt the chill of the night, not sure if it was from the cold or the conversation. He zipped his coat and shoved his hands deep into his pockets.

Coty kicked a stone lying on the sidewalk. It bounced off a garbage can and disappeared across the street. "Like I said, it could be one of two things."

"And?"

Coty shrugged. "I saw the human, the one on trial, and know about the Shadow she was with. I didn't inform the Night Council, but someone has, and my presence has been requested."

Erebus' phone vibrated against his chest. He pulled it out. A text.

"The girl?" Coty asked.

Erebus shook his head. "Janus. It looks like I'm coming with you." He detested these meetings and hadn't been to one in years.

Coty paused in his stride, glanced at Erebus and nodded.

They walked in silence through the downtown business section, towards the more ramshackle district. They passed several buildings whose windows were boarded up and had graffiti decorating their walls. Everything in this part of town seemed in need of repair. Garbage needed to be picked up, homeless people loitered in doorways of condemned houses calling out for money for their next fix; even the smell in the air seemed polluted. Erebus noticed the first streetlight burned out and counted to see if the fifth light was out as well. He heard Coty mumble something unintelligible, and, out of the corner of his eye, Erebus watched him count the next set of streetlights for the sixth light to be out.

They passed the next string of lights, and when they came to the seventh light no longer working, they turned into the driveway of a dilapidated house. Coty opened the creaky wire gate and let Erebus go through first. Every sound seemed amplified between the house and garage walkway. Single file, they came around to the back of the house and were stopped by a very tall, large figure.

The guard would've stopped any mortal in their tracks and had them rethink where they were going. From the dull light that showed from the back porch, Erebus could see the man had terrible scars on his face and neck. He suspected the disfigurement continued down, hidden by the

man's clothing. The guard said nothing, just raised a mammoth hand to make them wait.

Erebus knew the man was a Shadow, a sixth sense told him without having to think about it. What he wondered was how this Shadow had been scarred. A Shadow's skin should be flawless and perfect. They didn't get sick and never felt pain. That this guy would have scars which hadn't healed showed a warning to other Shadows. The Night Council had obviously stepped in, and he had been punished and was probably doing time working as a guard now.

Coty interrupted Erebus' thoughts and shattered the silence of the night air.

"Dude! What the heck happened to your face?" Coty pointed and tilted his head to get a better look.

"Naw-thang zat needs a sec-sec-cond look, pur-prutty boey." The guard's voice sounded scratched and broken, like it had been damaged. "I ca-can dew the zame to yers ifyada li-like."

"He's fine, just an idiot." Erebus pulled on Coty's sleeve and started for the back door entrance. "Come on. Let's get inside before you start trouble out here." The guard had some serious anger issues, and he wasn't about to let Coty help the guy work them out.

"Are there enough here already?" Coty restrained against Erebus' pull, his body half turned trying to talk to the guy.

"Enuf." The guard crossed his arms over his massive chest and turned away to face the empty, neglected yard. The back of his leather jacket had a skull with a gun that'd been shot and showed blood pouring out of the eye sockets and nose.

Erebus relaxed when Coty turned to follow him. They walked across the warped porch steps. Erebus held his breath as they entered the house and walked down the narrow staircase to the basement of the house. It was more of a cellar, and the steps were made of wood that had nearly rotted away. When they reached the bottom, he inhaled a thick, musty stench that seemed to ferment inside his nostrils. It was putrid and probably thick enough to seep into his clothing.

Dim lights led them down a constricted hallway to a larger, open area. The area seemed well lit, but the ceiling was very low. Erebus tried not to smirk when he heard Coty swear behind him after he banged his head. Old

insulation, dust, and whatever else filtered and sprinkled down through the air from Coty's noggin meeting to the edge of the ceiling.

His grin disappeared, replaced by a sombre expression, when they entered the room. The house might be a rat's nest, but this room belonged in a palace. It was like stepping through some portal, but Erebus knew that was impossible. However, the glass floor, gold walls, and pillars did make the room seem magical.

Shadows stood in a large circle, not talking or even paying attention to who entered. They stared at the figure in the center of the room. A female sat tied to a chair, nearly naked. Most of her clothes had been ripped and torn away. She faced away from Erebus, and he could see bruising and cuts on her bare back. Blood and vomit pooled around her feet. He opened his mouth to avoid breathing through his nose, knowing the smell didn't belong in this room. The rancid, sour smell hit him so strong he could even taste it.

Erebus moved to the left of the circle and stood behind several other Shadows. He had no intention of making his way to the front line. He swallowed hard as he watched Coty move in the opposite direction and push his way through those standing to the five seated in high-back throne-style chairs.

The Night Council were Shadows in charge of discipline and punishment. Stunning women, clothed in Renaissance dresses, who believed they were goddesses in their own right, even down to their golden high heeled shoes. Their names were engrained into Erebus' brain like his own name: Disciplina, Indivia, Furena, Laverna, and Poena. They sat there on their judgement thrones waiting to pass verdict on this poor, human girl.

Coty slid past the front line of watchers and stood in front of the wooden table. He leaned forward across it, his hand spread wide on the wood and spoke quietly to the Night Council. Erebus couldn't hear what was said but could tell from his rigid posture and refusal to acknowledge the girl; Coty didn't want to be there. His friend made a curt nod to the Night Council and moved to the left of the elaborately carved table, facing the girl with forced vacant eyes staring nowhere.

Not good, Erebus thought. Either Coty couldn't help the girl or he himself was in big trouble. Erebus moved to get a better view of his friend, the girl and those behind the table.

The Night Council wore matching long golden cloaks over their dresses. Erebus thought they looked more like capes and was reminded of Coty's earlier conversation about vampires. These five could pass for night creatures with their pale faces and beauty which looked chiselled from stone. They might be physically stunning, but their eyes looked evil. Erebus had wondered more than once if they took delight in the punishment of humans and others Shadows.

Poena stood, her heels tapping loudly in the near silent room. She glided over to the female in the chair. Every move she made appeared calculated and snake-like. The room grew more hushed. Poena grabbed the female's chin and forced her head up. The girl's raven black hair fell from its loosely tied bun and rippled as Poena shook the girl.

"You know what we are, child?" Poena's voice came out soft but full of accusation.

A chill ran down his spine, and Erebus wondered what the poor girl must be feeling. Relief and guilt filled him. Relief he wasn't able to see her face and didn't know her. Guilt immediately followed because of his relief and that he was helpless to do anything for her.

The human must have replied, but Erebus had been too lost in his own thoughts to hear her.

A vicious, morbid laugh escaped from Disciplina, sitting at the table, a long cigarette in a thin holder between her fingers.

"Who are you?" Indivia asked.

"Does it matter?" The girl shrugged, sounding defeated. "I'm human. Just a college student having a good time." Her voice became a whisper towards the end.

"Who told you of us?" Indivia demanded.

"N-No one. I slept with some of your guys, and after I'd been with the shadow-girl," the girl nodded her head in the direction of a female standing not too far from Coty. "I figured it out. It was easy." The girl sounded proud. "Especially after I fooled around with the girl and the guy together."

"You were so smart to figure us out all on your own?" Indivia mocked. She looked like a snake coiled and ready to spring.

"It wasn't hard." She shifted in her seat so her chin came free of Poena's hand. The remaining overstretched strap of her shirt slipped down her arm, revealing a mound of breast flesh. "If I say that someone told me,

can you let me go?” The girl looked around the room as far as her head could turn.

Furina jumped over the table, faster than Erebus though possible in the layers of dress she wore. Furina slapped the girl, the sound echoing in the room. She then punched the girl in the stomach. “You have the audacity to try and bargain with us?” She hissed.

“What else am I supposed to do?”

“Fear us!” Furina screamed. “You know what we are.”

“So what if I know you’re some kind of freaks? It isn’t like you possess any special powers.” The girl sounded annoyed. “What do you want me to do? Pretend you’re some kind of god and toss flow—” She stuttered when Furina slapped her twice; blood flew across the shiny floor. Furina wrapped her hand around the girl’s neck. The girl struggled but could go nowhere. When Furina stepped back, the girl spoke in a throaty voice, “Sorry, I meant goddess. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean it.” She began to cry. She made no noise, but her entire body shook and trembled.

“Are you trying for the sympathy vote?” Furina’s nostrils flared. “I want to become one of you,” the girl whispered.

“Impossible.” Poena laughed, a loud high pitched bark. Erebus wished he could leave. His stomach churned and he felt ill. He shouldn’t have come.

“I-I n-never meant t-to find out.” Blood ran down the girl’s hand as she tried unsuccessfully to get her hand free from behind her back.

“Doesn’t matter. The minute you learned about us, your fate was sealed.”

The girl’s shoulders slumped, her head dropping forward. The fight seemed to drain from her. “Please...please...please,” she whispered over and over again

“Things change when death knocks on your door, doesn’t it, sweetie?” Poena’s voice purred. She looked around the room, venom in her eyes. “Let this be a lesson for all of you. Share our secret and not only will we, the Night Council, find out, but the human and the Shadow’s life will be diminished. This one is diminished tonight, and those of you involved must remain behind.

“You know how set apart you are to be created as a Shadow? Yet, many of you think you’re bigger than the Night Council. You’re paid

handsomely to keep your secret and yet, you fools still make mistakes and bring problems to our door. Our door!” Poena stomped a foot, and marble cracked beneath her. She strode around the inner circle, pointing and touching those within reach. “You have immortality. You’re all idiots!” Poena screamed. She strode over the center of the circle and shoved the girl so her chair tipped over. The girl lay on her back, her mouth open in a silent scream.

Indivia rose from her throne. “The Night Council set up laws for all of us to live by long before many of you were even created. Those simple rules are for our survival. We are immortal, but we’re not invincible. We are vulnerable, and do you think for one moment, these humans will not cage us like animals? They wouldn’t understand we need to be within our shadow by dawn. We can only survive from sunset to sunrise. Are you fools too stupid to remember that as well?”

“We would no longer be able to mix among the human race if one or more of us were caught. That is, if any of us were to survive once our secret was out. Tell one of them and you might as well have a billboard add or internet advertising banner. It has always been zero tolerance for us. That’ll never change.”

Poena strode back to her chair, resting her hands on the back. Her knuckles became whiter than the paleness of the rest of her skin, but her face grew red. “Get out. All of you! The men who slept with this woman stay, and the female Shadow will be found out and made an example of. Remember this,” her arm swept across the room, “all of you, and don’t make the same mistake.”

Coty stepped forward and bent down, reaching out to straighten the girl’s chair. He leaned close to the girl’s ear.

“Leave her!” the Night Council shouted in unison.

Indivia spoke to the circle. “The Night Council has work to do. We have your mess to clean

ate at him. She begged and pleaded for her life.

The noise didn't belong in this magical room, but it belonged in the rundown house and putrid hallway. He ran up the stairs to get outside. He saw the guard standing on the deck with a toolbox and large black plastic bundle. He didn't pause to consider why the guard needed it. One look was enough to explain. It was all so wrong.

Breathing seemed impossible. Erebus struggled to supply the amount of oxygen his body was begging for. He heaved in long drags of cold oxygen, blowing hot clouds of breath which disappeared into the night air. Slowly controlling his racing heart, he thought about Coty, which only set it thundering again. Pausing in front of the house, he debated on waiting for his friend. Deep down, he knew Coty would be detained for a while, but he'd be safe. The Night Council wouldn't hurt those involved who hadn't broken the law. Coty hadn't told the girl what he was; he'd just made the mistake of sleeping with her.

No wonder depression clung to Erebus like a second skin. He hadn't been to a Night Council gathering in years; now he remembered why. He detested his kind and hated himself. Nothing he could do would save that poor girl. If he stepped in now, they'd both be killed. When the Night Council made their decision, it was final. Arguing would only lead to distrust and punishment.

He'd been there once and learned his lesson. He needed to do what Shadows always did best, walk away.

Right now, he just wanted to get out of there as fast as possible and try to clear his head.

Screw walking away, he wanted to run.

Chapter 4

Rum Jungle

A cool breeze stirred, and Erebus shoved his hands deep into his coat pockets. He'd grown tired of running. He'd slowed to a jog and then finally to a walk, head down, watching one foot lead the other. Even if his conscience hadn't registered it yet, he knew where he was going.

Leaving behind the crappy end of town with the hidden palace, he continued past tall office buildings towards Lake Street. He could already hear the sound of the waterfall from Falls Creek above the traffic noise.

Once inside the park, he could finally begin to breathe again. His feet took him towards the hundred-foot waterfall where he finally lifted his head. In the dark, he could see the white foam from the water. Falls Creek was the crowned jewel of the Ithaca gorges and for Erebus, his survival place. It was what had drawn him to Cornell in the first place.

He stared at the water, watching it fall without end. *Kind of like my life. I'm falling, and it's never going to end. There's no way out of this.* He sighed, his thoughts drifting to the one thing that had actually made him feel different for the first time in a very, very long time. *I need to stay away from Aurora. The meeting gave proof to that.* If she ever found out, she'd be the girl tied to the chair. Even if that were miraculously avoided, she'd never be able to comprehend who, or what, he was.

Coty had given him good advice. He had to be careful. It was clear as day Shadows weren't allowed to interact with humans, except to use them. Their entire being cried out for simple, instant lustful gratification. Hell would hold no terror against the Night Court if they heard a Shadow was looking for love. They'd never believe it, anyways. Shadows had no idea what love could even mean.

Why did he have to be so damn different? Like Coty, the rest of the Shadow world had no problem living the high life. He couldn't imagine one of them that was different like him.

Thinking of the others, he was reminded of a certain female Shadow who would create mayhem if she ever found him with a human. Nanny would destroy him if she even considered the possibility he could love a mortal. Nanny could probably do more damage than the five Night Council queens combined.

He settled onto a wooden bench that overlooked the waterfall. Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on his knees and made a conscious effort to think like Coty.

Keep it simple. Hang out, have some fun, then leave. People had relationships with no strings attached. Other Shadows did it all the time, and so could he.

If I feel I'm getting in too deep, I can leave. Find a new spot, a new waterfall. He'd never been to Niagara Falls; maybe a stint in Canada might be a good change of pace.

A repeated vibration brought his thoughts back to where he was. He pulled his phone out and flipped the screen on. He already knew who it was. Aurora had sent another text.

Aaron Buss, this is my last text. I know this is the right number. Drank toooo many spiced rum n cokes. R U ignoring me? My gals think U R a ghost.

Despite the events of the evening, the corners of Erebus' mouth twitched upwards. First a vampire and now a ghost, what was going to be next?

Screw responsibility. He'd act like a Shadow tonight and not care about the repercussions. There wouldn't be any. He'd get a taste of Aurora and simply walk away before dawn. Once he had a taste, it would be enough.

He rose and started jogging towards Lake Street to hail a cab.

Erebus leaned against the bar inside the Rum Jungle. He ordered a Molson Canadian and a pitcher of Captain Morgan and Coke. The place was already packed with people, music blaring, and the dance floor crowded. He watched the dance floor a few moments and then scanned the room as he waited for the bartender. If he didn't see Aurora he'd drink the beer and then leave. His heart sped up erratically when he spotted her. She stood, laughing with a group of girls on the other side of the dance floor.

He held his breath while he admired her body, unnoticed from across the room. Iridescent sparkles from her tank top drew his gaze to her round, perky breasts. Black jeans fit tight against her toned legs and

buttocks. His body ached with a primal desire. He wanted to touch her, to experience the feel of her creamy skin and see if it heated from his contact.

His eyes traveled from her hands up to her slender shoulders. She liked to talk with her hands. She wore her hair straight tonight, making him wonder if it was naturally curly. They'd have to spend the night together for him to find that out. He reminded himself to blink and breathe. He was getting way ahead of himself.

The bartender brought his order, which he paid for, and out of habit, included a large tip. He checked himself in the mirror behind the bar before turning. His dark hair rested in place, hardly mussed from the run to find a cab. He was surprised to see his steel eyes actually looked shiny tonight, and he had no idea why.

He wore a dark green polo. He undid an extra button to look more relaxed, relieved he'd checked his coat at the door. He looked down to make sure his black pants and shoes weren't dirty. Noting everything was clean, he grabbed the drinks and sauntered over to Aurora.

"Excuse me, ladies. The bartender suggested you might need another round." He stood behind Aurora and bent forward to set the pitcher on their table, inhaling her tantalizing perfume as his face brushed by her hair.

"Aaron, you came!" She jumped up to hug him. Wobbling from intoxication or her high heels, she leaned into him for support, pressing their bodies together. Instinct made him bring his arms firmly around her tiny waist. Unable to resist, he dropped his head down to place a light, tender kiss on her lips.

Both stepped back in surprise, although Aurora kept hold of his hand as she moved. He liked the feel of her soft skin against his. For once, he didn't have the notion to pull away.

"Hey, girls, this is Aaron Buss. See, he's not a ghost!" She stepped back towards him, leaning her weight against his frame. He grinned and, in the back of his mind, wondered if he might ever tell her his real name. Aaron sounded so much better, especially when she said it.

"Hi." He glanced at her friends, but his concentration focused on the heat from Aurora's body searing against his.

"Silly me." Aurora tapped her forehead. "Sorry, these are my gal-pals. Ally, Brianna, and my roommate, Tori." She pointed with her free

hand. Ally had dark hair and a cute nose. Her face lit up when Aurora said her name. Tori was tall, thin, and stunningly beautiful. *Gotta be a model*. He made a mental note to not introduce her to Coty. Brianna looked petite but sporty. She wore jeans and trainers and had her hair in a ponytail. She looked the least shy of them all and knew how to dress casual.

“Nice to meet you.” Erebus didn’t know what else to say. For a split second, he wished Coty was there. He’d know exactly what to say to make the girls laugh. “I should have brought glasses with the pitcher.” He took a swig of beer to wet his dry mouth.

“Not to worry. We can just refill the ones we have. Come sit and relax with us.” Tori patted a vacant barstool beside her.

“How ‘bout Aurora sits, and I’ll stand behind her?” He lifted Aurora onto the stool, then put his arms around her so she had to lean back against him. She didn’t mind at all. She smelled of perfume and lime from the drinks. It was the most intoxicating smell he’d ever inhaled.

A retro-dance remix from an old Cindy Lauper song started playing. The three girls jumped off their stools and screamed in unison.

“Dance floor, right now!” squealed Tori.

“We’ll stay here and save the seats.” Aurora said to her girlfriends’ backsides. Erebus settled onto Tori’s empty stool. They both grinned, staring at each other for a few moments.

“You didn’t answer any of my texts today.” She pouted. Erebus licked his lips as he stared at her lower, protruding lip. He briefly wondered if she pouted because of the amount of alcohol she’d consumed or if she was simply pretending to look sad.

“Sorry. I got up late and didn’t check my phone until early this evening.” That wasn’t a complete lie.

“Right. So you’re more of a night person?”

You have no idea. “I’m here now if that counts.”

“Definitely.” She grinned and reached out to brush his hand lightly with her fingers. She hesitated before slowly pulling her hand back, resting it under the table.

“I’m glad.” *Could I sound any more idiotic? Say something intelligent. She’s scanning the dance floor for her friends.* “Do you want to dance?”

Aurora's blue-green eyes swung back to his face. He watched her argue her response through her facial expressions. Her mouth and eyes popped open, then she closed her mouth and exhaled. She tilted her head slightly and grinned.

"I'd rather sit here with you."

"Or we could stand on the dance floor together. I have this vision of you as a teenager -- dressing like Cindy Lauper and dancing in front of your bedroom mirror."

She dropped her head back and laughed. He loved the sound. It wasn't some light, whimsical sound. It came out deep and throaty, straight from her core.

"Though I am more of a Katie Perry fan, I think the entire female population has danced to 'Girls Just Want to Have Fun' at least once in their lifetime."

"Well then, what are we waiting for?" Pushing his barstool back, he grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the dance floor.

"You're too good to be true. I don't know any guy willing to stand up and dance in front of some girls he's just met."

"I'm trying to impress you, and since I don't know your friends, I've nothing to lose." He couldn't believe how bold he spoke. It wasn't like him and he kind of liked it. He shouldered his way towards the center of the floor, keeping Aurora close to his side. He watched the hungry looks from the guys around them as he held her in his arms. He felt the build-up of a new, strange sensation inside of him. He wondered what it was.

All he knew was when he had the chance, he planned on kissing her so hard it took her breath away.

They reached Aurora's friends.

"Do you dance? Or are you going to just stand there staring at Aurora?" Tori had a teasing note in her voice.

Filled with a unique feeling of confidence, Erebus winked at Tori when he reluctantly pulled his eyes away from Aurora.

"Aurora, you don't mind if I take Tori for a quick spin?" He offered Tori his hand when Aurora nodded. He then focused on the model, trying his hardest to impress her with his dancing skills. He led her through ballroom steps at an upbeat pace.

A lifetime of evening dance classes were finally paying off. Years ago, Coty had convinced him to go to the classes with him. Coty went to pick up chicks; Erebus actually wanted to learn how to dance. He'd continued with every different type of dance class, long after Coty grew bored with it.

"Where'd you learn moves like these?" Aurora had stopped moving to gawk at him. He noticed only Tori and he were now dancing in their little circle. He released her and reached for Aurora.

"Dance classes." *Forty years of them to be exact.*

Another retro-eighties song blared through the speakers. Erebus turned his focus on Aurora as the rest of the people in the bar disappeared.

An hour later the group of five became a group of six. Coty found Erebus just before last call. Aurora's three friends drank him up, unable to resist his charisma. Once the bar closed, they ended up at Aurora and Tori's apartment for one more round.

They all stood laughing and chatting in the living room. "Have a seat," Aura said. "Tori and I'll grab some drinks."

"Hey, Aurora?" Coty called out, winking at Erebus. "You're so young. How'd they let you into the bar? Don't you have, like, another year before you're legal?"

"Ha ha, funny guy. Fake ID," she teased. "And I don't look young." "Yes, you do," Coty and Erebus said at the same time.

"Double Funny. Did you boys practice that on the walk over?" Tori called from the kitchen. "Did Erebus-Aaron tell you I taught him how to dance?" Coty dropped onto the couch in the dimly lit living room. Ally and Brianna sat on either side of him. Erebus headed for the leather-worn ottoman. Aurora and Tori grabbed drinks from their kitchen.

"He mentioned he took dance lessons." Aurora walked over and dropped onto Erebus' lap, taking a swig of his beer before handing it to him. He laughed at the grimace on her face as she swallowed.

"Not a beer connoisseur?" He liked the feel of her firm bottom on his thighs.

She shook her head and giggled. "With the amount of alcohol I've consumed tonight, you'd think it would be fine. But, nope. Don't like

beer. I'll stick to the lady drinks." She rested her head on his shoulder.

They talked and joked around with each other. Played a few terrible rounds of cards and ended up sticking cards to their foreheads and trying to guess their own numbers.

Eventually Erebus and Aurora ended up back in the same ottoman as the beginning of the night. Relaxed, Erebus' hand involuntarily brushed strands of hair from her face. He was drunk with desire for her. He felt her body begin to relax as he ran his fingers through it. Her breathing slowed. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the arresting features of her face, not even hearing Coty call his name several times.

"Aaron. AARON. EREBUS!"

Irritated, Erebus shook his head to focus on his friend. "What?"

"I think it's time we get going. It's getting close to five o'clock, and these beautiful ladies need to rest. If we overstay our welcome, we won't be invited back."

Erebus didn't want to agree. His brain told him one thing, but his body was begging for something else – someone else.

"You get going. I can meet you in an hour." *Wait! Sunrise's at 5:32 today.* He groaned with the weight of the reality from his thoughts. "Shit. I'm coming. I'll meet you downstairs in ten minutes."

"Five minutes." Coty turned to the three ladies who were now sleeping on the couch. "G'night, gems. I'll definitely be seeing you again." He walked out the door without looking back.

"Aurora." Erebus whispered her name as he wrapped his arms under her body. As he shifted to stand up, he noticed she felt almost weightless – fragile. She nestled closer into him and sighed. He headed down the hall, unsure which room was hers. He silently kicked the first door open and looked in the room. Designer clothes and magazines were strewn about the floor and furniture. Model's room.

He moved down to the end of the hall and pushed the last door open with his shoulder. This room appeared neat and organized. Shelves of books against three walls, a queen-size bed against the far wall with a picture above it. The blown-up photo stopped him in his tracks. It was of Falls Creek, at night. He stared in wonder at it, to the girl in his arms, and back to the picture.

Torn, he finally laid Aurora down on the bed. Light as she felt, she easily pulled him down with her, and he tumbled onto the bed. Resting an elbow beside her pillow, he leaned forward to taste her lips. Her hands entwined into his hair as a warm sigh escaped her soft mouth.

“Stay. Stay the night,” she murmured between kisses.

“It’s pretty much morning. I can’t.” Was there a torture any sweeter than this? “I’ll call you tonight. Maybe we can go for a coffee.” He dragged himself away from her lips, her scent, and her bed. He grabbed the duvet at the end of the bed and covered her. Backing out of the room, he watched her eyes flutter closed, a small smile on her face.

He found Coty outside the three-story apartment building. They started walking towards Lake Street.

“What’s wrong with you,” Coty hissed. “Are you trying to get into trouble?”

“I thought you were having a good time tonight.”

“You need to stay away from that girl.”

“What?” Erebus stopped momentarily in his tracks.

Coty shook his head but kept moving. “This can only lead to trouble. Get out before you get yourself in too deep.”

Erebus started walking again, his long strides easily catching up to Coty. “I can handle myself.”

“This is different. I’ve never seen you like that before.”

Erebus rubbed his neck and looked away. “What’s wrong with having fun? You do.” Coty poked him in the arm. “I don’t do this.”

“I’m not stopping.” *I can’t stop.*

“As your friend, I’m telling you this is going to end you. I’ll have to tell Janus.” Coty checked his watch, his pace quickening. “Look, it’s too late to talk about it now. I need to find a bus stop. There isn’t one on this road until we hit Lake Street.” He took off running fast, like he was being chased by time itself.

Erebus could feel anxiety tightening in his chest. He pulled on his collar, his eyes darting everywhere as he searched for a pay phone. Looking everywhere, he clenched and unclenched his fists. Short gasps escaped as spittle ran down his chin.

He finally spotted a phone booth near the next intersection, beside a Kentucky Fried Chicken. Apprehension made his feet break into a run. He

could sense the sunrise just at his back. Aurora completely forgotten, he leaned into the booth like a sprinter at the finish line of a race.

The sun broke through, casting a thin, small wisp of a shadow onto the pavement, behind the phone booth.

Chapter 5

Mythology

I swear I'm going under. I'm in the middle of this dark abyss, trying to fight my way to the surface. What if I'm thrashing in the wrong direction, going down instead of up? I can't hold my breath much longer. My body feels ready to explode, begging to find release -- to find freedom. It couldn't get any darker, but everything is now pitch black. I stop struggling and allow myself to sink, in defeat.

Erebus flinched, then shuddered as he came to. His eyes fluttered open. He squinted at a bright, red light shining directly at him. Taking slow, deep breaths, he focused on slowing his heart rate and draining the anxiety which racked his core. He hated the transition from his shadow back into human form. It always left him confused and disorientated.

He stood, leaning against the inside of a phone booth. A Kentucky Fried Chicken sign in neon red and white bounced off the booth's glass. He glared back at it as he pushed the bi-fold door open, stepping out into the brisk, fresh air.

Without checking the sky, he knew it was moments past sunset. The shadows of the evening had just come out. His next thought was of Aurora. She brought a smile to his lips, and all the heaviness that filled his chest lifted. It was Sunday night; maybe he'd call her.

Coffee first. Holding his breath to avoid the stench of the Colonel's Fried Chicken, he started walking north. Erebus looked around, trying to assess his location. A small café sign across the street caught his attention.

Pulling his collar up against the cool wind, he strolled into the café, grabbing a newspaper from an empty booth. After ordering coffee and cappuccino, he sat down to read the paper. The forecast called for rain later that evening and sunrise would be at 6:09 tomorrow morning. Thank goodness autumn had arrived. It made the days shorter and nights longer.

He tossed the paper aside and reached inside his jacket for his phone. Setting it on the table, he waited before checking it. First he drained his coffee, then flipped the cell open. Strangely disappointed, there were no new messages.

Sitting straighter, he scrolled through his contacts to find Aurora's number. His slender finger hovered over the keys as he thought about what he'd text her. He'd never cared about what others thought or how his actions would make them respond. Now, for the first time, it all seemed very important.

A – what r u doing 2nite?

His thumb drummed against the booth table trying to come up with something to do. A second later, he snatched the phone off the table before the first vibration had finished. Heart hammering, he scanned her reply.

Hi :) in the library, mythology research paper. Boring. What r u doing? Shoot. He wanted to see her this evening. His fingers flew over the keys. Having coffee, hoped u mite join me.

Her reply came seconds later.

I wish! Come find me N bring COFFEE! Latte, pretttty please?

He replied: *What floor? C U in 15.*

He ordered a latte to go and grabbed a cab to Cornell's library. He checked his phone when he stood in front of the building.

3rd floor. Far right.

Erebus slipped through the old wooden door that led from the staircase into the main part of the library's third floor. He gazed around. There were only a few people studying. It seemed reverently quiet – peaceful. He wondered why he didn't come here more often.

The brightly-lit sanctuary gave the impression of daytime. Well, what he'd seen on television about daytime. The only giveaway here was the night-darkened windows. Erebus headed toward the right, rounding a corner and walking towards a study area with long desks and rows of chairs.

His body found Aurora before his eyes did. He could feel the internal heat and the fluttering of his heart. His stride quickened as he walked towards her, as if being pulled by invisible strings.

Aurora sat bent over a book, at a large, double-sided oak desk. Wavy hair fell forward, covering her face and obscuring his approach.

Silently stepping towards her, he paused. Eyes closing involuntarily, he inhaled deeply through his nostrils. He could smell a new scent on her, like

a bit of the ocean, sand, and something else.

He set the latte down. Then resting both hands on the desk, he reached in to get closer to the glorious new smell. His nose brushed against her hair, and his eyes involuntarily closed again.

Aurora brought her head up, her cheek brushing against his nose.

“You smell like sunshine.” There was awe in his voice. Eyes still closed, he tried to capture the scent in his mind. He wished he could hold the scent forever.

She laughed. “Sunshine? I think you mean suntan lotion. Tori and I spent the day by the water, trying to catch a few lingering rays.”

“Mmmm. I like it.” He sat down across from her at the oak table. A brass antique table lamp cut off the full view of her. Pushing back on his chair, he lifted the front two legs off the floor. He crossed his arms over his chest and grinned at her. She made him feel alive.

“What?” She glanced up from the enormous textbook. “Nothing. You look very...studious.”

“Hey! You’re not allowed to come here and make fun of me. If you start calling me mature, I’m going to have to do some serious butt-kicking.” She covered her mouth. He could see the wrinkles near her eyes and knew she was smiling.

Holding his hands up in mock surrender, he let the chair drop with a light thud. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table so he could have a better look at the textbook she studied. The pages had some type of list – a bold word, followed by regular print.

“What’re you trying to read? A dictionary?”

“No. Well, kind of.” A breathy laugh escaping her lips. “The paper is for that elective ancient mythology class I’m taking. This book has mythological names and their meanings listed in alphabetical order, plus country of origin.”

“Name meanings?” In all his years, he’d never given that a thought.

“Yes. Here, give me a name, and I’ll see if the name ever represented a god.”

He paused as he tried to think of a name. Something simple. “Does it have Janus?” He lifted his eyebrows and shrugged.

Aurora gave him one of those “you’ve-got-to-be-kidding-me” looks but flipped to the “J” section, her hand running down the page as she searched.

“Yup. It says here Janus is from Roman Mythology – The god of beginnings. One of the principal Roman gods, the custodian of the universe. The first hour of the day, the first day of the month, the first month of the year (which bears his name) were sacred to him. His chief function was guardian deity of gates and doors.” She grinned. “Do you know him?”

Definitely. “Maybe.”

“Try another name.” She thumbed page corners as she waited. “How about, Ueuecoyotl? It’s spelled U-E-U-E-C-O-Y-O-T-L.” “You know someone by that name?” She flipped to the U’s.

“It’s Coty’s full name, actually. He’s got a South American or Native American background, I think.”

Aurora’s finger ran down the page. “Holy smokes, it’s here! It’s from Aztec Mythology. In English, it represents the old, old coyote. He’s the god of fun, laughter, and sex. Or whatever else makes life merrier.”

Erebus laughed; it couldn’t be closer to the truth.

“Give me another one. You’re good at original names.”

“What about Erebus?” He said it quickly, slurring the word into two syllables instead of three. “It’s spelled E-R-E-B-U-S” His heart thundered in his ears. He was sure Aurora could hear it from across the table. What if she made the connection to his name? Erebus – Aaron Buss.

“Let’s see.” She looked down as she flipped to the “E” section. “Hmm... here it is. It’s under Erelus with Erebus beside it. Looks like Erelus is Roman and Erebus is Greek. He was the son of a primordial god, Kaos, and represented the personification of darkness and shadow, which filled in all the corners and crannies of the world.” She looked up for a moment, “Poor guy. It sounds a bit depressing. Give me a girl’s name. I’m gonna use these name to write my paper. This is great!”

Erebus tried to swallow, but his throat felt dry. He wished he’d never asked about his stupid name. At least she hadn’t made the connection. He stared at her. “Oh yeah. Girl’s name right?”

Aurora’s thumb tapped against the parchment paper. She blinked rapidly and pretended to smile innocently.

He racked his brain and could only think of one. “Nanganana.”

Aurora brought her chin up, along with her eyebrows. She raised a hand showing him her palm. “I’m not going to ask. I’ll just see if it’s here.”

She flipped to the “N” section. “You’ve either got some strange friends or took this class. I think you’ve got some faddish for freaky names.” She glanced down and traced a find down the page. “Let’s see...Yup, it’s part of the Oceanic Mythology. She was the goddess of Deadly Punishment. Seems if you die a bachelor, there’s no hope. She’ll wait by the coast for your soul to arrive and then bash it against the rocks.”

“Ouch.” Definitely fit Nanny’s description.

“Alright. Time to stop the fun research. I need to make a quick trip to the ladies’ room.

When I return, I’d better get some work done.” She winked at him as she slid her chair back and headed towards the restrooms.

Erebus watched her walk away, enjoying the slight swing of her hips and muscled derriere. Once out of sight, he reached forward and pulled the textbook towards him, quickly turning to the beginning of the lists. He sucked in his breath and held it when he found her name.

Aurora – Roman Mythology (or Eos in Greek Mythology). Goddess of dawn.

Erebus slammed the book shut, not wanting to read any more. Dazed, he pushed the book back to Aurora’s side of the table. What were the chances his name represented shadows and darkness and her name symbolized dawn? Was it destiny or were the gods just playing – mocking him and having a laugh?

Aurora returned a few moments later. As she sat down, Erebus stood.

“I really should go and let you get your paper done.” Part of him didn’t want to leave, but his head needed the night air to clear it.

“You don’t have to go.” Aurora looked surprised.

He stared in wonder at the goddess before him. She had, by far, the sexiest facial expression he’d ever seen. When she looked at him like that, he didn’t think he’d ever be able to say no to her.

“I can stay.” *Forever, if you’d like.*

“It’ll take me less than an hour to get my first draft done. I can finalize the paper in the morning.” Her face lit up when he sat back down.

Content, he watched her work for the next two hours. They chatted about Cornell’s campus, what she liked about her courses, and the classes she hated. When she began putting her notebook and pens into her backpack, she turned the questions on him.

“How long have you lived in Ithaca?”

Erebus blinked. He rarely thought about time in months or years. “About five years, I think.”

“What’d you study?”

“Study? Oh, I didn’t come here for school. I just liked the town and the scenery.” It was the truth. He’d been running from New York and woke up one night here in Ithaca. University towns were always the easiest – he appeared to be close to the same age. Plus, students kept strange hours that didn’t make his seem weird.

Aurora nodded but didn’t look like she understood.

“I-I’d been living in New York and had had enough of being in the city. Ithaca seemed like a nice place for a fresh start.”

“Did something happen?”

Erebus couldn’t mistake the concern in her eyes. He rubbed his temple. He hated talking about the past. It was hard enough to talk to Coty, and he knew what had happened. Now Erebus was trying to explain this to Aurora – a girl he really liked but hardly knew? “Let’s just say it was trouble, a relationship gone badly.” Nanny was the trouble. She was also a Shadow. She no longer deserved the time in his thoughts.

“Shall I assume it was the girl’s fault?” Aurora broke through his reverie.

He blinked, surprised at how easy she could read him. “You could say that. I misunderstood her intentions. Plus, like I said, I’d had enough of the city. I wanted to see the seasons through nature’s eye.”

“Wow. You’re a nature guy? Do you come from a colony of nudists?”

“Pardon?” Erebus stared at Aurora, wondering if she was crazy. He saw the corners of her mouth twitch a few times. “You’re taking the micky out of me, aren’t you?”

“The what?” She started giggling. “I’m only teasing. Where are you from then, not New York?”

Erebus stood. “Let’s get out of here and go for a walk. You’re eventually going to need to get some sleep if you’ve got classes tomorrow and that paper to write.”

Aurora got up, resting her hands on her hips. “You didn’t answer my question.” She’s definitely going to make a good lawyer. “I’m originally from England.” “It must have been when you were young. I don’t hear an accent.”

“Yeah, I left a long time ago.” He wasn’t going to let this conversation go any further. “I hate to do this to you, but I really need to get going. I’ve got work to do.”

“What do you do? Are you a professor? Maybe a midnight assassin? eBay shop-aholic?” “No. Though I tried, but couldn’t find midnight assassin posted in the classified ads.” He

gave a brief smile and glanced towards the exit. Rolling his shoulders, his body ached to get out of the building. He impatiently waited for her to slip her jacket on and grab her backpack. Silent, he walked with her down the staircase and out of the library, purposely keeping a safe distance away. Nanny wasn’t even here and she was ruining his evening.

Once outside in the open night air, he felt he could relax again but was unable to look at her. He concentrated on the ground. There were a million things he wanted to say but had no idea how to say them. He barely knew her and yet felt like he’d been waiting for her since he’d been formed. He didn’t know how to be with her but didn’t think he could breathe without her.

“I’m sorry if I said something to upset you.” Aurora’s voice broke through his thoughts.

His upper body rose and fell as he sighed. He reached for her hand and kissed each finger gently. “It was nothing you said. I’m the one who’s sorry. I just don’t like thinking about the past. They’re my demons, not yours.”

“Shall we focus on the future then? Like maybe a movie on Friday night?”

He could tell she was making a valiant effort to sound cheerful. He wondered if she felt the same strings pulling them together as he did. “I’d like that.”

“Me, too. Do you want me to pick you up at your place? I’ve got a car.”

Sure, think you can meet me at one of the local pay phones? Just after sunset? Say around seven-ish? “How about we meet at Starbucks on University? The one just before you enter campus. I’ve got a meeting there at seven which shouldn’t take too long.”

“Okay. Around seven-thirty, then?”

“Sure.” Hopefully Janus will have been there and gone by then.

Aurora stood on her toes and kissed him lightly on the lips. He could still smell the sunlight on her skin and taste her on his lips after she'd whispered good night and walked away.

A few raindrops began to fall. Turning, he headed in the opposite direction, already deep in thought. He knew what he wanted to do and he didn't care. Four nights – basically forty-eight

hours of his time to try and get a place sorted. If he wanted this to even remotely work, he was going to have to start living like humans did.

Scratching his head, he tried to remember how much cash he'd buried in the park by Falls Creek. He'd been stuffing money in that old trunk for years, never bothering to count or spend it. It wasn't like he had been saving it for a rainy day. He just didn't know what to do with it.

Giving it away would have put him in the limelight or drawn suspicion from the Council; neither of which he wanted.

He paused mid-stride, wondering what Janus would say if he knew what he was planning.

That was something he didn't want to contemplate. Friday would be here soon enough.

Dashing into a corner store, he bought a local paper. He was determined to thumb through the classifieds, make some phone calls tonight, and start going through rental apartments tomorrow evening.

Four nights to prepare on breaking almost every rule and law set by the Shadows. And not get caught.

Chapter 6

The Handler

Friday evening dawned with new anticipation for Erebus. He always dreaded the start of the weekend, having to meet his handler. A really decent guy, Janus never questioned his actions or choices. Janus meant well; he just didn't like seeing a Shadow depressed. It went against their code. In all the years Erebus had met with Janus, he couldn't recall a time being eager to see Janus. In all honesty, he'd never felt enthusiastic about anything, or anyone. Even when he'd been with Nanny, he'd never felt content.

Shortly after seven, Erebus walked into Starbucks, whistling a tune he'd heard on his new stereo – which he'd set up at his studio apartment. In two days he'd managed to secure a place to live and cover the first year's rent without even making a dent in his buried treasure box. Inside, he ordered an espresso and turned to see Janus sitting in a brown leather chair, his mouth hanging open.

"Hey, Janus, it's good to see you." Erebus grinned, he couldn't help it.

"Erebus?" Janus' eyes were as big as the saucer he held. His eyes narrowed. "Have you been doing drugs?"

"No!" Erebus laughed as he sat down across from his handler.

"What's happened? I've never seen you like this." Janus' face softened. "Have you found yourself a playmate, or two?"

Sort of. Just not the way you'd approve. He glanced toward the doorway then back at Janus. "I decided I needed an apartment." He figured a partial truth would be the best answer.

Janus looked disappointed for a moment before his expression turned thoughtful. "Good for you...I think. I'm glad to see that you're trying to settle here. Not sure what you need a place for, but hey, if it keeps that smile on your lips, I'm alright with it." Janus set his briefcase on the table and withdrew a stack of fifties. He held them out to Erebus.

"Thanks." Erebus took the money and stuffed it into the inside breast pocket of his leather jacket. He checked his watch, not sure if Aurora might show up early and hoping Janus would leave.

"Who're you meeting?" Janus' voice took on a suspicious tone.

Erebus blinked. What should he do? Deny it? Lie? What would Coty say? "Just a girl." "Oh...Oooohhh! It seems you're finally taking

advantage of the mortal market. Good for you.” He let out a low chuckle.

Erebus sighed. His simple statement was meant to sound as Janus understood it, but he didn’t like referring to Aurora that way. Then again, her mortal market bits were quite enticing. He smirked and puffed his chest out, suddenly feeling the excitement of what might happen. That his little plan might actually work.

“Word of caution, Erebus: You haven’t been with a mortal in a long time – don’t misunderstand your physical feelings.” His eyebrows crushed together. “What I am saying is don’t get yourself attached. I don’t want you thinking an apartment and a girl might make you settle down and be *human*.”

“It’s no big deal.” Erebus didn’t know what else to say. He knew if he admitted his true feelings, Janus would force him to leave or end the relationship before it started. Shadows don’t fall in love – plain and simple. He didn’t want to take the risk of having to end something before it even began. He also never understood the unwritten code of Shadows being with humans, besides physically. He’d never asked why the rule existed. The dangers or risks didn’t seem so serious to him at the moment. However, now was definitely not the time to question Janus about it.

Janus tapped a thumb against the leather of his briefcase. “None of us can choose our destiny. None of us can stop it either. Remember that. You can’t change things.” Janus’ eyes revealed years of knowledge Erebus had never experienced.

“I’m fine.” Erebus wondered if Janus knew him more than he knew himself.

The door opened and a blast of cool, fresh air blew over them mixed with a familiar musky scent. Erebus stared behind Janus, admiring the girl by the door. Aurora wore a full leather coat to protect her from the autumn wind. Her hair fell straight over her shoulders and down her back. Erebus missed the curls, but the straight hair gave her a more professional look. He swiftly ran his eyes up and down her slender body once more. The soft brown leather jacket tied tight around her waist brought notice to her curves.

She waved when she caught sight of him, making her way towards the table. Out of the corner of his eye, Erebus watched Janus turn in his seat to follow his gaze. Janus let out a low whistle only Erebus could hear.

“Hi.” Erebus stood abruptly, not wanting her to say Aaron and have Janus correct her or worse, ask questions. “This is,” he thought quickly, “a colleague of mine, Jan.”

Janus stood gawking, appreciation displayed in his expression.

“Hi, I’m Aurora.” She held out her hand, flipping her hair over her shoulder with a toss of her head. Both men hungrily followed the action. She seemed oblivious to their attention.

“Hello, Aurora. Lovely name. It’s very nice to meet you,” Janus gave her a perfect smile. He glanced at Erebus and winked. “I have other appointments I need to see this evening, so I must be on my way. Have a *pleasurable* night.”

If Erebus could blush, his cheeks would have burned from the implication Janus had blatantly thrown out. “Cheers.” He’d have preferred to throttle the grinning man who picked up his briefcase and headed out into the night whistling the same tune Erebus had been when he’d first come in.

“He seems nice.” Aurora watched Janus leave.

“Jan—Jan’s a good guy.” For some reason, he didn’t want to say Janus’ full name. “Like Coty?” Aurora was still standing behind the now vacant chair.

“Much better than Coty.” Erebus laughed at the comparison. It was like night and day...so to speak.

“You want to head downtown to the theatre?” She pointed to his two, now empty, mugs. “Unless you want another one?”

“I’m good. We can head downtown, or we can walk around a bit and catch the later show.

That is, if you want to.” He suddenly wasn’t so sure of himself.

“A walk sounds nice. Maybe I’ll grab a latte to go. I think winter’s on its way a bit early this year.” She headed to the counter to order.

“Hmmm...” Erebus’ eyes watched Aurora’s derriere swing with the leather of her jacket as he followed her.

“Do you want anything?” she asked.

You. No way could he say that out loud. “No thank you.”

She paid for her order and Erebus held the door open for her. He watched the door swing closed and wondered if this might be a big mistake. Sooner or later Aurora would start asking questions he had no idea how to answer. Running a hand through his hair, he took a few quick

strides to catch up to her. Something pulled him to her, it seemed better to be beside her, not out of reach.

“What were you like as a kid?” He wanted to know everything about her and didn’t girls like talking?

She shivered and then laughed. “I’m from San Antonio so I definitely didn’t grow up understanding the full concept of a white winter. I like the sun and the heat, even as a kid. If you told the kid me I’d be going to Cornell for university I probably would have tried talking myself out of it. Don’t get me wrong, I love it here but that bloomin’ cold wind takes some getting used to. Where’d you grow up? You mentioned England, how old were you when you immigrated?”

Questions already? Erebus concentrated on the lines on the sidewalk and not stepping on them. What could he say? “Around London. Is your family still in Texas?”

“My mom and dad are. They’ve been up to visit here once and are talking about coming here for Christmas. My mom’s curious what Christmas with snow looks like. At the start of the school year I’d planned on heading back home but I’m not so sure what my plans are...”

Now it was her turn to stare at the ground. Erebus watched her moment of awkwardness and almost uttered “oh” when he realized she was probably hinting at her parents coming up to meet him. No way could he handle that, the risk was beyond even contemplating. “I’d go back. If I were you, I mean. Get some sun, see friends and family. Have a nice holiday.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” She twirled a loose hair lock around her finger a few times before tucking it behind her ear. “You already have plans?”

Erebus couldn’t miss the disappointment in her voice. It tugged inside his chest. “Coty and I have a bit of a tradition.”

“Not going to see your parents? Are they still in England?” Parents? Crap, now what should he say? “It’s just me.”

Aurora pressed her lips together, the corners of her mouth slightly turning down. “I’m so sorry.”

“No worries. It’s fine.” He felt like a jerk letting her assume and believe a lie. However it was better than the truth. “Tell me more about

what you were like as a kid.” He was curious to know. He’d never been around kids. Most were in bed by the time he came around or the ones still up were miserable and ready to go to bed. He wanted to know everything about her.

She held her cup with both hands and took a sip. “I had a normal childhood.” She reached out and squeezed his arm a moment. “What’s normal nowadays though? I should say I had a great childhood. My parents married after college and have been together ever since. They’re still as much in love as they were when they met. That doesn’t seem so typical anymore.

Everyone’s divorced or remarried or who knows what else. We did family stuff too. Road trip vacations all over the country to see all of nature’s wonders. My dad’s a big civil war history

buff. One year we drove to South Carolina and did the whole drive up through Virginia to Gettysburg. I think we stopped at every civil war monument along the way.” She laughed, staring ahead but obviously seeing memories of the trip in her head. “I was around nine or ten and made this huge scrap book when we got back.”

“It sounds like a fun trip.” He smiled at her happiness.

“My dad wants to do it again this summer. He wants him and my mom to fly out when exams are done and go from here. Do it backwards this time.” She tossed her cup into a passing trash bin. “If we’re still hanging out, you should come.”

Part of him actually wanted to go. Deep inside his chest he felt this longing to see the sights through her eyes. To hold her hand and read some monument or walk through some battlefield now covered in grass and wild flowers. It was an impossible dream. He knew it. Every fiber of his being knew it. But somewhere deep inside a new, foreign emotion was trying to make its way to the surface. He tried to push it back down. “We’ll see.” He couldn’t say anything more.

They walked in silence, the atmosphere between them slightly strained. It didn’t last long. Aurora seemed to have a natural ability to smooth things over and not press or pry. She changed the subject and began chattering about school and how she got a full scholarship to Cornell before she’d even finished eleventh grade. They ended the evening with a sweet kiss in front of Aurora’s door. He didn’t push to come in nor did she offer.

Two Friday evenings later, Erebus waited at the same Starbucks for Aurora. Janus had spent the past forty minutes grilling him on how he was doing. He seemed to understand Erebus, obviously better than he knew himself.

“Don’t break the code,” Janus had warned again. “I don’t want to have to force you to leave.”

I’m not going to ask, so please don’t tell me if you’re still with the blonde girl. Break it off before it’s too late. Do it now. Tonight. It’s clear you’re getting too attached. I don’t understand why or how it’s happening, but it needs to stop.”

“It’s fine,” Erebus replied curtly.

“No, it’s not. I see it in your eyes, and I spoke with Coty.” He shook his head at Erebus. “Don’t be stupid. We’re not meant to be with them. They’re gone in the blink of an eye, and we’re left...with nothing.”

Erebus watched him leave, unsure if destiny was giving him a nudge. He stared at his mug as he thought about Janus’ words. Janus knew better than he did; he’d been around a lot longer, and it was his job as a handler.

He rubbed his forehead, unsure of what to do. He pulled his phone out, planning on sending Aurora a text to cancel the evening. They’d hung out almost every night the past two weeks. He sent a text to Coty first.

Dude. What R U doing 2nite? We should meet up.

Coty’s reply came instantly back.

‘Bus! Finally. U ditch the girl? Meet me at Rum Jungle @ 11. We’ll find hot chicks. That’ll drop the memory.

“Who’re you texting?” Aurora’s sweet voice broke his train of thought.

“Coty.” He quickly shut his blackberry and stuffed it in his pocket before glancing up. She looked more divine tonight than yesterday.

“Does he want to meet up?”

“Yeah. With just me.” He was angry with himself. He should finish this now, not later.

Janus was totally right. This was a mistake. For him and for Aurora. He rubbed his chin. What was he *really* worried about? Getting caught and

possibly getting her killed? Or Aurora breaking his heart? He straightened and stood. Heading towards the door he walked, almost stomping. He knew she'd be right behind him.

He stopped and swung around. She bumped into him, hurrying to catch up with his long strides.

“What’s wrong? Did I say something to piss you off?” She sounded confused. “If you want to hang out with Coty you just have to say. You’re the one who asked me to meet you here tonight.”

He swallowed hard. “Look, you’re a really sweet girl, but this isn’t going to work. We’re fooling ourselves. Sorry.” He shook his head as he tried to think of what else to say, hating himself for being an ass. The room suddenly felt too hot. He couldn’t come up with anything else, so he turned, shoved the door open and headed outside.

Aurora ran after him. He was walking by the glass building which looked like black diamonds with the streetlights shining down when she caught up to him. She grabbed his arm and forced him to face her. She snatched the collar of his jacket and pressed up against him, his front torso warmed from her soft breasts pressing against him through the thin fabric of her shirt. Neither had bothered to do up their coats.

“You can’t blurt that out and then walk away. I don’t believe for a moment you mean it.” She was angry but she looked crushed and so young. Innocent. “I don’t want you to go.”

Erebus’ head swam with indecision. She smelled intoxicating, and his body allowed it to be drawn towards her. His mind shouted he needed to walk away – to leave before he got hurt. He wanted to ignore the inner voice. It always acted more Shadow than human. He sighed. “I think it’s better for us both.”

“Why? You say that, but your body’s telling me differently.” She stared intently into his face but pressed her body tighter to his.

Not so innocent. He closed his eyes and exhaled. Cringing, he realized he’d have to inhale her delicious perfume again. It was only going to fog his mind more.

Aurora pressed. “You’re really going to stand here and tell me you truly don’t want to give me – us – a chance?” Her voice came out quiet, but the determination in it shouted clearly. He could feel her heartbeat

strong against his chest; it seemed to echo his own. “I’m not worth whatever risk you’re so afraid of? You’re a liar Aaron Bus. And a fool.”

He clenched his jaw, grinding his teeth. Screw the risks; screw Janus and his worries. “I do want this, more than anything I’ve ever wanted. You just don’t get it. You have no idea.”

“What don’t I get? What do—”

He dropped his head down and kissed her hard, cutting her off. His lips crushed against hers, urging her mouth open to accept his tongue against hers. She kissed him back with the same determination. He brought one arm around her slender waist, the other came to the back of her head so he could bury his fingers in her thick, curly hair. His hips pushed against her with a raw need he’d never felt before.

Without realizing it, he picked her up and pinned her against the building wall. He poured his entire soul into his kiss. For once, he allowed his feelings to direct his actions, not his thoughts. He didn’t need to breathe; he just needed her lips entwined against his. He couldn’t seem to get enough of her taste, her warmth, her scent, or her body. He wanted everything and debated about taking her right there on the street. He could have his pants undone in mere seconds and her skirt lifted even faster. She’d be ready for him. He could feel her heat pressing against him. His control started to disappear and lust began taking over reason. It was intoxicating.

He pulled back as suddenly as he’d started. That desire was his inner Shadow controlling him, wanting the physical need satisfied before anything else. This was the life of a Shadow – the draw for physical gratification, to absorb everything they could. He’d learned to control those urges, but with Aurora, raw desire and lust took over everything.

“Wh-what?” Aurora’s chest heaved as she tried to catch her breath. She ran her teeth over her lower lip, pausing to bite it before opening her mouth. She pressed her hips harder against his, grinding small circles against him. Her hands entwined behind his neck, she tried to push his face back towards hers.

Staring at the ground, Erebus ran his fingers through his hair, trying to slow the beat of his heart. He could barely think and fought to contain what little control he had left. He froze the moment he looked at her. The streetlight shining behind them gave the illusion of daylight. He blinked as

he momentarily envisioned what it would be like to stand beside her in the sun. He reached for her hand and kissed each finger gently.

“I don’t think the entire world needs to see me nearly raping and pillaging you.” He smiled, trying to make light of the intensity of his feelings, begging his erection to stop trying to control his brain.

“I’m not sure you can rape the willing.” She gave a sly smile.

He groaned at her words, watching her press her back against the building and arch her back, bringing her cleavage towards him. She didn’t do it on purpose; her body was simply responding to him.

“Do you want to go to my place or yours?” His words sounded rushed. “Yours. You don’t have a roommate to answer to in the morning.”

“You’ll still have to answer to Tori, you know?” He grinned as he pulled her away from the building and started walking towards his studio apartment. The speed of his gait forced her to almost jog. He made a conscious effort to slow down.

“True, but you won’t have to.” She snuggled closer to him. Then she stopped and forced him to look at her, her face completely serious. “You want this, right? I mean, not just the sex, but the whole package?”

This was his last chance to leave. He could lie and live the rest of his life never knowing.

Was the risk worth breaking every rule he’d ever been taught?

Reason returned with startling clarity. “Aurora, you probably won’t understand this, but you’re my ray of sunshine. You’ve made the night less dark. I think I’m addicted to you or whatever power you have over me – physically and here.” He brought his hand to his chest.

She giggled, possibly from nervousness he couldn’t tell, then smiled. “You’re right. I don’t have a clue what you’re saying. If a friend told me their boyfriend said that, I’d think it was totally cheesy. However, coming from you, it sounds deeply romantic...and hot.” She stretched up on her toes to kiss him, her tongue pushing its way into his mouth. She slowly pulled back and rubbed her nose against his.

“You still got that angel outfit?” They started walking. Desire took over his thoughts again; that wonderful, lustful addiction.

“If you’re looking for some foreplay, mister, you’d better be the one wearing the costume tonight. I’m tired of waiting for you to come ‘round!” She teased and slapped his butt.

Chapter 7

Fallen

They fit perfectly beside each other. Aurora's head nestled into his shoulder as his arm wrapped around her, his finger lightly making circles on her soft body. He didn't want to move. He wanted to stay where he lay – forever. Except the vibrating from his cell on the nightstand drove Erebus crazy. He sighed with relief when it stopped.

His gaze travelled across Aurora's slender arm that covered her chest. He shifted slightly and caught his breath when she moved her arm and showed her naked breasts. Unable to resist, he lightly traced his finger along each rib and then cupped her breast. They were firm and inviting. With his finger, he traced the rim of her nipple. He felt himself harden as her nipple responded to his caress, and, even as she slept, her hips pushed towards his. Mouth open, his breathing got heavier as he debated about rolling her onto her back and letting his mouth finish what his fingers had started.

His train of lust paused when the irritating buzz of his phone distracted him again. Still lightly squeezing and playing with her nipple, he glanced up at the phone. It danced halfway across the nightstand. Reluctantly, he moved his hand, catching the cell just before it fell to the floor.

Coty had sent several texts and now resorted to actually phoning. Erebus hit the end button to send the call straight to voice mail. About to toss the phone on the floor, he glanced at the last text message from Coty.

'Bus, I know where U R. I'm outside your pad. Get out here NOW!

Guilt washed over him. He looked down at Aurora's luscious naked body. Lust and remorse coursed through his veins. He dropped his head back against the pillow and sighed. Coty wasn't the problem; he simply wanted to help. Coty had every right to worry, and he'd have to let Janus know.

Ignoring his own needs, he concentrated on what wasn't warm and moist beside him. He rolled Aurora onto her back, hoping not to wake her. He gently laid her head on the pillow, freeing his arm. He brushed his lips against her forehead, her eyelashes, and lightly on her mouth.

"Hm...mm..." She turned over to press her body against him once again.

He groaned. She felt so good. “Sweetie, I have to go.” His phone started vibrating again, as if to confirm the fact.

She struggled to open her eyes in the dim light of the moon sifting through the window. She yawned and stretched against him.

“Don’t go.” Her breath was hot against his chest. Her hot tongue flicked against his chest. “I have to,” he whispered. *But I really don’t want to.*

“Wha—” Aurora mumbled. She slowly pushed away and sat up. She looked at him and then wrapped the sheet around her chest.

Erebus smiled slightly at her sudden shyness. She hadn’t been timid minutes ago. He raised an eyebrow as he watched her stand up and begin snatching her clothes off the floor.

“What’re you doing?” He didn’t understand her actions. She seemed... angry.

“Getting dressed. I’m not staying in your apartment if you have to leave.”

“Oh.” He’d just assumed she’d sleep here until morning and then go about doing whatever she did. He bit his tongue and kept silent; the ice in her voice a clear warning.

Stealthily, he stood up to put his clothes on. He watched her jerk her hair into a ponytail and march into the living room to grab her jacket. She waited for him, arms crossed and foot tapping, by the door.

“I’ll walk you back to your place.” He wasn’t sure what else to say and felt awkward at the sudden change in the atmosphere.

“It’s too far. I’ll catch a cab.” She refused to look at him.

He couldn’t read the expression on her face. Without talking, they walked down the stairs and into the darkness outside.

A voice erupted from the shadows. “It’s about bloody time!”

Aurora jumped back against Erebus. Reflexively, he stepped in front of her, one arm protective as he blocked her. He could feel her pulse quicken.

“Coty, you just scared the crap out of Aurora.” Erebus could hear the venom in his voice. Ignoring Coty’s open-mouthed stare, he put his arm around Aurora and pulled her tight against him and stepped toward the streetlights. Ironically, a cab appeared from around the corner. He flagged it down and held the door open for her.

“I’ll call you.” He wanted to kiss her but wasn’t sure if he should. She still lingered on his lips, and he was tempted to taste her one more time. Instead, he stood behind the cab door and waited for her.

“Whatever.” He could hear the disappointment in her voice. He hoped the trembling was from the cold and didn’t mean she was crying – that would destroy any resolve he had inside of him.

“Bye.” He shut the door and silently watched the cab disappear up the road. He wondered if he should send her flowers. A dozen roses or maybe two?

The shove against his back brought him out of his trance. He swung around and lashed out at Coty.

“You idiot! Why’d you have to scare the shit out of her?”

“Me? Dude, I had nothing to do with the look on that girl’s face. It was there before I even opened my mouth.” Coty leaned against the brick building, his arms crossed.

Coty’s casual stance just pissed him off more. “Can’t you spend one night on your own?”

Why do you have to be SO annoying? I can’t have one night without you calling or bugging me! Your stupid texts messed everything up.” He detested that he sounded like a spoiled brat but still refused to look Coty in the eye.

“Oh, no, you don’t. You were supposed to meet me at the Rum Jungle. When one o’clock rolled ‘round, I knew you were with her.” Coty’s head jerked in the direction the cab had driven off.

“So what?”

“So what?” Coty mocked. “You know exactly what. Janus told you. I’ve warned you. Your head’s so bloody messed up. What’s it going to take for you to realize we aren’t supposed to be with them? They’re supposed to be just toys for us, nothing more.”

“Whatever.” Erebus started to head back into his building. Coty irritated him more tonight than he ever had. Erebus needed to clean up before finding a pay phone.

“I don’t think you’re listening. You need to get it through your thick skull.”

Erebus stomped back to Coty. “I’m thick skulled? Ain’t that the kettle calling the pot black?”

“Huh?” The look on Coty’s face would’ve made Erebus laugh, had it been any other time. “Speak English, man. You’re the one being the idiot here.” He pointed an accusing finger. “You’re trying to pretend you’re one of *them*.”

Erebus would have punched Coty if he knew it could actually hurt him. Damn Shadows for not being able to get hurt. Immortality sucked. He took a deep breath, not even trying to hide how pissed off he was. “I’m not trying to be human. I know what I am. I know the rules. I know my limitations. You’re mad at me because I stood you up for a girl.” He turned to walk away from his friend.

Coty spun him around, and Erebus froze, surprised by the look of genuine concern in his friend’s face. “I’ve seen Shadows act stupid, selfish, and even overreact.” He jabbed a finger at Erebus. “But you...You’re a Shadow of doubt. The sad thing is you don’t even know it. You hide behind this mask of depression.”

A wind picked up, scattering Erebus’ thoughts. He didn’t know if he was mad at Coty for his big mouth, or because he might be partly right.

Coty took a step back and shook his head. “I don’t want you to get hurt, and I don’t want you to get in trouble.” Coty sighed. “Bus, I think you need to move away. If you have to get out of here, I’ll come with you. She’s...just a girl.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re the only one who seems to think so.”

Erebus stared past Coty, to the entrance of his apartment building. He pressed his lips tight together, his shoulders slumping. “What am I supposed to do?” he whispered.

“Leave or leave her alone.”

“I don’t want to. I tried to end it tonight, and, instead, we ended up in bed.”

“Great! Sex with a Shadow. You’ll never get rid of her now. She’s in love with you, and now you slept with her?” Coty rolled his eyes. “You’ve bloody fallen.”

“Fallen?”

“Yeah, and I’m not talking about tripping over something. I’m talking about falling for the girl.”

Fallen in love? Impossible – for a Shadow at least. Then again, something was happening to him which he couldn't explain; deep down, he knew the truth. Maybe Coty was smarter than he let on. "I...I don't know about that." Even the lie didn't sound convincing to him.

"Jeepers, man. You're in further than you even realize. You have to get out of here. I'll go with you."

"I'm not leaving. I've got a year's lease on the apartment."

Coty's laughter broke through the night. "That's your excuse?" His hands went up by his head and he shook them. "You think Janus'll buy that?"

"Don't tell him," Erebus begged.

Coty tilted his head, peering up at the night sky. His jaw muscles tightened as he ground his teeth. "Finish this. You had your bit of fun and now finish it. Before the end of the weekend.

You promise me that, and I won't tell Janus" He patted Erebus on the back. "Maybe you're like me and you just need to get her out of your system. If you get my drift."

Erebus ignored Coty's last comment. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Give me a bit of time, and I will. I'll break up with her. I've never felt like this – ever." No Shadow or human had probably ever opened his soul this way.

"Fine. Just...be careful. Don't get caught, and don't tell her anything." Coty's gaze darted to the street, and he lowered his voice. "You know what'll happen if she discovers what you are."

A flutter of something ran through him. He wondered ironically if it might be hope, or fear. "I'll try. I promise."

"Try?" Coty must have seen more in Erebus' face than he let on. "I guess that'll have to be good enough for now. Take advantage of the sex. She's got one hot body, in my opinion."

Erebus immediately visualized what had just gone on upstairs earlier. He grinned, he couldn't help it. It disappeared when he remembered how upset Aurora seemed when she left. Maybe it was already over. He wasn't sure if that was a good or a bad thing.

Coty cracked a smile. "Now show me your place. It isn't a hole, is it? I want a key to bring chicks by."

Chapter 8

Nights of Pleasure... and Peace

Erebus paced back and forth in his living room. He checked his watch, releasing a short huff when he realized the minute hand had only moved about ten notches. Tonight, he'd been nervous ever since coming out of his Shadow. Last evening, after Coty left, he'd searched the Internet for the right type of flowers to send Aurora. He had no clue. Guys sent flowers to girls after they screwed up, right? Even when they weren't exactly sure what they'd done wrong.

What kind of flowers would a female like, especially a female with Aurora's desirability? Was he supposed to send lots to show how sorry he was, or should he send flowers based on their meaning? It took most of his remaining waking hours to choose and then make sure they could be delivered during the day. He didn't think he had put this much thought into anything else he'd ever done.

The good thing about searching on the Internet, he'd found some other interesting sites. Purely by mistake, he'd come across this auction site in New York City. They were having an online auction for antique souvenirs in the NYC area. A K6 red antique phone booth, originally from Britain, was up for auction.

He'd been shocked to see his old home – he'd always considered the booth his when he lived in England and then in New York. It was, in a sense, part of him. His life began when that K6 phone was created. He'd become that Shadow and had lived fifteen years of his life in England, with that phone booth as his main dwelling. He thought back to the night he'd

awakened on a ship, completely confused and shocked more than usual. It had taken him an hour to find someone working on the transatlantic ship to find out why the booths were in the cargo hold.

The phone booth had been sold to New York, along with ten others that were going to be placed throughout New York City. He'd just immigrated to the other side of the world without knowing it.

He chuckled when he thought about the stash of sterling pounds he'd buried in Liverpool. He wondered if it was still there. One day, he'd have to go back and check. The hard part, of course, would be figuring out how to get there.

Staring at the K6 photos, he touched the computer screen. He planned on winning it, no matter the cost. He would talk to Janus on Friday and ask him how he could get it.

Taking a momentary look around his loft apartment, he knew it would be perfect. It would go in the middle of his living room, by the support pillar. He hadn't put any furniture in that spot, as if it was waiting for the right memento to go there.

He hit his forehead with the palm of his hand, amazed he'd never thought of it before. He may never have to leave the apartment to search for a pay phone ever again. The worry of the pay phone becoming extinct wouldn't be an issue anymore.

A buzzing came from on top of the stereo. He swiped his phone off, flipping it open in one fluid motion. No text. Aurora was actually calling him.

He cleared his throat. "Hu- hello." "Hi..." It was followed by silence.

He couldn't tell anything from the single word she'd spoken. Her voice gave nothing away. "Ummm...did you get the flowers?" He closed his eyes, glad she couldn't see him, only hear how stupid he sounded.

"I did. Thank you. That's an enormous, beautiful bouquet."

"I wasn't sure what to buy. The sunflowers reminded me of you when I looked up flowers last night. Some site said purple hyacinths mean I'm sorry or please forgive me. Maybe it was terrible sorrow, or something like that."

"You actually picked flowers out based on their meaning?" She sounded surprised.

Crap! Not the cool thing to do. Erebus covered his face with his hand, looking up at the ceiling. "Uh, sort of. I felt like an idiot after...you know. We had, I mean, I had a great time, and then I ruined it. I can't take it back, but I wanted to try and make up for it."

"I had a great time, too. I thought that was kind of obvious." She giggled. They'd barely said anything, and he could already feel the heat.

Awesome. He'd apologized for the right thing. "You up for hanging out this evening?" He grinned in the mirror above the fireplace. He did a Rumba dance across the room, loving how his feet slid across the hardwood floor.

"No plans with Coty?"

Erebus could hear the teasing in her voice. “Nope. I’ve got all night... Just gotta be out before dawn.” He stopped dancing when he realized what he’d said. It was easy to forget himself around her. “How ‘bout you get your lovely tiny hinnie over here?”

“Out before dawn?” Little Miss Lawyer didn’t miss a thing.

“Uh, yeah. Early, early start tomorrow.” What would he say if she asked what he did or something like that?” He held his breath.

There was a pause on the phone. “Alright. I can’t stay all night, anyways. I’ve got an early class and a debate I need to prep for. I’ll pop over for an hour. Sound fair?”

Safe. She didn’t care, or whatever, it didn’t matter. “Stop talking and get over here. You’re wasting precious time.” Grinning, he shut his phone and tossed it perfectly back onto the stereo speaker.

The hour turned into three, or was it four? After, he walked Aurora to her car, enjoying the coolness of the light rain that had begun to fall. When her car had disappeared from sight, he stood outside his apartment, feeling more alive than in all his years.

It became a pattern, a month of many nights. Coty didn’t nag, Janus never asked and no Night Council came calling. Between Aurora’s visits, he made time to hang with his friend and even cracked the odd smile for his handler. Janus assumed Erebus had found what had been missing and teased him about how many women he was now bedding. Erebus never said much, but he also never corrected Janus. He began to feel a strange confidence that everything might work out okay.

It wasn’t all easy. Erebus avoided Aurora’s questions about what he did during the day and why he never answered his phone. Whenever the questions became too personal or risky, he’d turn the music on and dance with her. He taught her to dance the rumba, the foxtrot, and ballroom dancing. Dancing on the floor or in the bed sheets seemed like the taste of sweetness he’d been missing his entire life. He hated the mornings, but with winter closing in, the days grew shorter, and he’d be able to spend more time with her.

He entertained her one Friday night, his spirits high after seeing Janus. Janus had informed him they’d gotten the antique phone booth from the online auction. It would be delivered sometime in the next week.

“You’re in a good mood,” Aurora said. They sat relaxing on his bed.

“Do you ever feel like, things are finally coming together and life can’t get any better?” In the back of his mind, he made a mental note to call a phone company to get his new phone in working order. It would be useless to him without it actually in running order.

“Sometimes, but not right now. I just got a D on one of my papers. Hanging out with you is detrimental to my grades. I’ve never gotten below a B.” She flopped back against the pillows and exhaled. “I’m going to need to buckle down and start studying again. Exams are two weeks away.” She groaned and sat up, blowing dishevelled strands of hair from her face. “I have a test Monday I’ve barely reviewed my notes for. I’m never gonna make it as a lawyer.”

“You will.” He leaned forward, gently pushing the stray hair behind her ears.

She smiled. “I think you’d better give Coty a call and get him to take you out till I’ve passed everything. He was teasing me the other night that I don’t let you out to play.” She winked. “We do hang out *a lot*.”

“Hmmm...” He nuzzled her neck then rested his chin lightly on her shoulder. “How about I give him a shout in a little bit? You can study here, and I’ll have enough fun for the two of us.” He’d barely seen Coty the past few weeks. It’d be good to catch up. Realistically he needed to see Coty and figure out what was happening to him. Coty would know what to do. He had said Aurora would be out of his system but that didn’t seem to be happening anytime soon.

“Wonderful!” He heard the sarcasm in her voice. “It’s Friday night. You’re going out, and I’m staying in.” She poked him in the ribcage. “But you’re right, I need to. Except, I’m going to study at my place. All my stuff is there and I won’t get anything done here.” She began collecting her clothes. “Maybe Tori and I will meet you guys later at the Rum Jungle?”

He laughed. She was addicted to him as much as he was to her.

“How are things going with the little *human*?” Coty sat on Erebus’ couch with a glass of red wine.

“Aurora.” Erebus flipped through the radio stations trying to find something besides the news. “It’s fine.”

“Janus still doesn’t know, does he?” “Nope.”

Coty set his wineglass down and leaned forward. “Bus, I’m happy you’re enjoying yourself but who are we kidding? You need to end this. You were supposed to get her out of your system and move on.” Coty shook his head. “How can you still be attached?”

Erebus fiddled with his beer bottle. He thought Coty would have the answer to that question. “I don’t know. Aurora’s my choice of drug – she’s addicting. She’s beautiful, wonderful, sexy, smart...flawless.”

“They’re all flawed, trust me. If she’s your choice of drug, you should know better – drugs are bad for you.”

Erebus hit the power button on the remote and turned the stereo off. He looked at Coty and leaned against the pillar in the middle of the room. Taking a deep breath, he asked his friend the same question he'd been asking himself the past few months. "Why's it wrong?"

"Drugs? They'll kill you. They're bad for your body and you end up needing them more than you need oxygen or anything else. You'll push everyone you care for away to get your fix."

He rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "I'm not talking about drugs. I'm asking why is it so bad I'm with Aurora? I know the Shadow Laws are in place for our safety, but how can being with a human, except for sex, be dangerous?"

"Same as drugs, 'Bus." Coty sighed a long, sad-sounding sigh. "You won't know till you've gone too far, and you can't pull yourself back. Those laws are set for our survival, and probably for the safety of human survival, as well."

"I'd never hurt her." Erebus crossed his arms over his chest.

"I know you wouldn't mean to. What if another one of us did? Or if she was killed in some freak accident or left you? 'Bus, my friend, you're different than the rest of us. Those eyes of yours show every emotion and you're...you're sensitive. You don't have the lust-drive like most Shadows." Coty shrugged his shoulders.

"I have that drive." He hated Coty being right. He was different – his lust didn't drive him to be who he was, it only came out when he was with Aurora.

He closed his eyes, momentarily hating their colour and that people could read him through them. Nanny had once told him eyes were the windows to the soul. Then she'd laughed her sharp, wicked cackle. He blinked in surprise; he hadn't thought about her in ages.

"You need to end this." Coty's voice broke through his conscience. "I don't want to."

"Come on, man! If Janus finds out, he's not going to be Mister Nice Guy. He'll be Mister Ruthless Businessman. He doesn't like things going wrong on his turf. Think about it. You're not the only one in danger here; he'll punish me for not telling."

"I would never bring you into this."

“I know, but I’m already involved.” Coty’s fingers tapped against the back of the couch. “This is my own making. I’m the one who’ll deal with the consequences.” He shifted his weight and sat down on the arm of the leather chair.

“Doesn’t she ask you questions? Or do you lie?” Coty raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t lie...sort of. I just don’t answer. She doesn’t really ask about me or my past. She’s fine with how things are.”

“That’ll change. It changes. She’s going to want to know more about you, your past, and what you’re doing now. Let’s face it, she’s already wondering stuff. Why don’t you see her during the day? Why don’t you have family? Why don’t you want to meet her family?” Coty scratched his head. “Where’s she from, by the way?”

“Texas. San Antonio. She’s going home for Christmas. She’s busy, you know. She’s going to be a lawyer, so she doesn’t have time to see me during the day. We’re both comfortable with the situation.”

“What happens when she graduates? Or wants to get married? Have children?”

Erebus stood up and began to pace. The large room suddenly felt small, stifling. He walked over to one of the windows and tugged it open. The blast of cold didn’t help sooth his sudden

temper flare. It was going to snow soon. Three weeks away, and Ithaca was definitely going to have a white Christmas.

“I don’t know, alright.” Erebus ran his fingers through his hair. “I’m taking this as it comes. For the first time, I actually feel content. I’m happy being me. I don’t hate my life or what I am.”

Coty stood up, walked over to Erebus, and gave him a friendly punch on the shoulder. “I know, man, I know. But if you stay with her, she’s going to ask. You’re not going to age, and you can’t tell her why. You may believe you’re in love, but think long and hard about it. They’ll put you away for years, even centuries, and they’ll kill her. You tell her, and they’ll kill her to keep her quiet. You won’t even get to say goodbye.”

Erebus’ heart stopped. He forgot how to breathe. The dizzy, foggy feeling he had every

night before coming out was nothing compared to what he felt at this moment. He’d never let her be hurt because of him. He buried his face in his hands, then looked at his friend without saying a word.

“Shit, Erebus.” Coty looked into his eyes. “This is going to kill you. I can read everything in your face. You need to ask Janus if there’s some rehab place for us to get off humans.” He shook his head. “I’m willing to bet Janus knows you’re still with her. How can he not? I can tell – it’s written all over your face.”

“Christmas,” Erebus whispered, his voice cracking. “What?”

“She leaves for three weeks at Christmas. That’ll be my detox. When she gets back, I’ll end it.”

“I think you should do it before.” Coty turned to close the window. “We can just move while she’s gone. I’ll go wherever you go. You’re my family.”

Coty might be superficial, but he was Erebus’ best friend for a reason. Loyal beyond anything imaginable.

“I don’t want to move.” Erebus grinned suddenly. “I just bought my K-Six phone on an online auction. It’s being delivered next week.”

“Dude! That’s totally awesome!” Coty switched from concerned dad to college crazy boy in milliseconds. “That’s why all this new crap is here?” He pointed to the pillar and the wires hanging down from the ceiling.

“Yup, got my own little shadow box now.” The change of subject was what they both needed. “Want me to find you an old English bus stop?”

Coty laughed. He walked around the couch to grab his leather jacket. “No thanks. I prefer that challenge each and every morning. College towns will always need buses, so I’m safe from extinction.” He slipped his jacket on. “Come on. Let’s go look at some hot chicks and grab a few beers. I’ll play, you can window shop.”

“Sounds good. I’m thirsty.” Erebus grabbed his jacket. “Rum Jungle?”

Chapter 9

It Changes

Erebus spent the weekend hanging out with Coty, who was beside himself with excitement. He dragged Erebus to every nightclub and party in the city. By Sunday almost morning Erebus couldn't wait to just chill for a few hours before sunrise.

Aurora and Erebus texted back and forth constantly and Monday night he called her to ask how her exam went.

“Better than I thought it would. I'm just glad it's done.” “I'm sure you did great.”

She laughed. “Thanks for the vote of confidence. I'll find out Friday and we can either celebrate with dessert or drown my sorrows in the ice cream.”

“Sounds good.” He didn't exactly know what to say. Most of him wanted to rush over to her place and a tiny part told him to remember what Coty had said. He really should be trying to see less of her and slowly let things fizzle out. Hopefully fizzle out was a better term to use. However that didn't really seem like an option.

“Aaron? Are you still there?” Aurora spoke loudly through the line.

He blinked. Lost in thought, he had missed Aurora's question. “Sorry, what did you say?” “Are you alright?” The concern in her voice made him cringe with guilt.

“I'm fine.” He cleared his throat. “I've got some stuff going on this week. I won't be able to see you till Friday. Is that okay?”

“Stuff? Like work related or Coty related?” She giggled. “Forget I just asked that. I sound like a lawyer and worse, like a jealous mistrusting girlfriend. I'm definitely not the latter.”

He smiled, relieved he didn't have to explain anything. “I have to see Janus first thing Friday night so why don't I pop by your place as soon as we're done with... our meeting?” He hoped that sounded somewhat normal or official or whatever it needed to sound like.

“Awesome. I have a paper to finish that's due Friday so I might actually get some work done. I'll see you Friday then.”

“Okay.” Should he hang up? He waited silent with the phone by his ear, unsure what to do. “Okay. I should probably let you go then,”

Aurora said after the long pause, then she added almost in a whisper, “I miss you.”

Something thundered against his ears as her three little words buried inside of him and took hold. He was never going to want to let her go. Holding his breath, he let his thumb click the end button on the cell phone, hating himself for pretending he hadn’t heard her.

Thursday evening, Erebus bought Aurora a present. Positive she had done well on her midterm, Erebus felt the urge to treat her – at least that was the excuse he used for picking out the diamond sunflower gold necklace. He’d never bought a gift for anyone before but, after spending two hours at the mall, three days in a row, he felt pretty confident she’d like it. He’d watched men dash through shops, making simple purchases. They all seemed to shop at record- breaking speed. Most decent-dressed blokes hit the jewelry store.

He stopped at a donation gift wrapping center, handing the elderly lady working the booth two fifty dollar bills. His eyes went wide when he feared she might have a heart attack. She surprised him by acting like a teenager, squealing in delight and running around the table to hug him.

“Bless you, dear.” She hugged him again. “I’ll wrap this up real pretty for your sweetheart.

In case things don’t work out between the two of you, I’ll give you my phone number.” She giggled and patted his shoulder.

He couldn’t help but smile. She was very sweet.

the old phone booth. Is it working now?"

Erebus stepped back to let his handler in. Janus slipped his leather jacket off and handed it to Erebus who casually tossed it on the stereo speaker, conveniently covering Aurora's gift.

Straightening, he walked over to the old telephone booth; he ran his hand caringly over the red enamel. "It won't be hooked up till after Thanksgiving. Apparently it needs to be rewired and they need a specialist to do it."

"He opened and closed the old door, looks to be well taken care of. It's quite hard on the exterior."

located between two buildings on Fifth Avenue since the day it arrived."

"What?"

"Give me if I told you I came over with the picture?" Janus stepped back and admired the picture.

You have no idea how lucky. A picture of Aurora popped into his head. "It's true. This is the very K-Six, it survived and is now here, in my apartment. You're right. It's pretty amazing."

disappearing because the window. I'm glad to have you on the couch, popped it open, your regular. The other is

located in New York but never batted an eye, but he had the task. Since moving to

Ithaca, Janus had never asked him to do anything.

"Don't look so worried." Janus pulled an envelope out of his briefcase. "I just want you to drop this off at the address shown on the front. That's it. Make sure it's given to someone in person, not in a letter box."

Erebus glanced at the address as he took the envelope. His hand already felt like it was burning. The address showed a doctor's office on the other side of town. He looked up at Janus, his eyebrows raised. "You want me to drop this off at night? The office will be closed."

“They have a walk-in clinic two times a week, Tuesday and Friday evenings. You can do it tonight or Tuesday. Just get it done before I see you next week.” Janus shut the case and headed towards the door.

“What’s inside?”

“That’s not your concern.” Janus didn’t break his stride. “I understand you better than you realize. I keep your anxieties at bay. However, we cannot exist without the help of certain *humans*. Some choices are not ours to make.” Janus grabbed his jacket, not even noticing the gift box under it. He headed for the door and opened it. “Have a nice weekend, and I’ll see you next Friday.”

Heart pounding, Erebus stood silent staring at the door for several minutes before finally grabbing his jacket. Sighing, he stuffed the letter into his inside pocket and slipped Aurora’s present in another. He might as well drop the letter off on his way to see her. It would weigh heavy if he kept it till Tuesday.

He entered the walk-in clinic where the receptionist asked him for his details. “I’m not here to see a doctor. I was asked to deliver a letter to Dr. Apate.”

As he talked with the secretary, a doctor who was dark haired, clean-shaven, and fortyish stepped out of a cubicle near them. He fiddled with the chart in his hands. “I’m Dr. Apate. What seems to be the problem?”

“This is for you.” Erebus handed the doctor the letter, trying not to feel guilty. The doctor didn’t seem surprised and said nothing more. He just stuffed it into his pocket and turned to go back to work. The dejected look on his face made Erebus determined to never do anyone’s dirty work again. Even a simple job of dropping off a letter, he wanted no part of it.

Dr. Apate paused before going into his office. “Excuse me – I’m sorry, I don’t know your name.”

Should he give it to him? Erebus sometimes wondered if the council was trying to test Shadows to see if they were being careful. “It’s Aaron. Aaron Bus.” A slight white lie.

The doctor’s hand rested on his office doorknob as he fidgeted. “Aaron, do you have a moment to chat?”

Not really. He didn’t want to talk to this doctor he didn’t know, about a letter he had no idea what it referred to. “Sure.” Erebus followed the doctor into his office.

The doctor walked around the large, antique wooden desk and sat down. He stood a moment later and, with hands clasped behind his back, began to pace.

Erebus stood, set his legs slightly apart and crossed his arms. He watched the older man walk back and forth a number of times. “Sir.” He cleared his throat. “I don’t know what is in the letter. I’m just the messenger.”

“Yes, yes. I understand.” The doctor nodded several times before finally stopping his pacing. “I know what you.”

Erebus blinked. Was this some kind of test by the Council? He glanced for a hidden camera or wondered if the man wore a microphone. “I’m not sure I know what you mean,” he said slowly.

The doctor waved a hand. “Piddles. It isn’t important. I’ve spent my entire doctor life helping you.”

Erebus pressed his lips tight. He wanted to ask in what way but forced himself to say nothing. It seemed to clearly be a test. Why would Janus do this to him? Unless he knew about Aurora. Yes, this definitely had to be a test.

“No comment or questions?” One of the doctor’s hairy eyebrows went up. “Fine. It appears you know where I am if you do need me.” He handed Erebus a business card.

Erebus took the card and stuffed it in his back pocket. The doctor sat down and began sorting through files stacked on the table. He did not look up or say anything else. Erebus shook his head and walked out the office, down the short hallway and past the waiting room. *Definitely the strangest conversation I have ever had.*

Grabbing a cab, he gave the driver Aurora’s address. Erebus reached inside his coat and held her gift in his hand. He tried to swallow to clear the dryness in his throat. What if she thought it corny and laughed? Or worse, what if she saw the box and thought it was an engagement ring? He’d promised Coty he’d break up with her after the holidays. This gift might make it happen sooner.

He had no chance to change his mind. The taxi stopped in front of her apartment building, and she stood outside waiting for him. Dressed in a leather jacket, a woolly hat on her head with matching mittens, she looked stunning.

“I thought you might do a runner.” She smiled but bit her lip. Her weight shifted from foot to foot.

“A runner?”

“Yeah, you know, take off so you don’t have to pay for a night out. You know, ditch the date.” She laughed, pushing the hair away from her face with her mitten.

“I’m supposed to buy you something? Like dinner?” He tried to look shocked.

She rolled her eyes. “Aaron Buss, sometimes you’re the strangest man I’ve ever met.” He held his hands up in mock surrender. “Maybe. But what if I did buy something?”

Something just for you? And for the record, it’s not dinner stuffed in my coat pocket.”

Her eyes went big and she grinned. A smile which also seemed to hint that she had a secret as well. “You didn’t! So do...” She smirked again but didn’t finish her sentence. She giggled and then changed the direction of the conversation. “You know, it’s nearly Thanksgiving, but I’m willing to bet Santa’s planning on giving you lumps of coal at Christmas – for the rest of your life. I think he punishes those who tease.”

“Ha-ha. You are so funny,” he teased as he held the door open for her to step inside her building. Rest of his life? “That’d be a heck of a lot of coal,” he mumbled to himself.

“Pardon?”

“Nothing.” He leaned forward and planted a quick kiss on her soft lips.

They walked into her apartment and there, in the middle of the room, rested a large, brown paper-wrapped present. A tiny red bow sat in the corner, with Aaron written neatly beside it.

Brows raised, his eyes trailed the size. She’d gone and bought him a present? His hand dug inside his pocket and he squeezed the tiny package inside. *Crap, size did matter.*

“Well, aren’t you going to open it?” Aurora nudged him towards the forty-two inch gift. “You seriously bought me a present? Why?” He swallowed.

She shrugged. “I wanted to.” She stared into his eyes. “Does it bother you? I thought you said you got me something. I honestly didn’t know

you had.” The corners of her mouth lifted. “I thought it was kind of ironic we both got each other something.”

He didn’t know what to think... or say. “Why don’t you open your present at the same time?” He pulled the gift from his pocket, shrugging out of his coat in one fluid motion.

“Ahhhh, I was hoping it might be a bean burrito.” She winked at him and flashed a big smile. Whipping her hat and mittens off, she flipped the box over and began picking at the tape. “Go on, open yours. This is so exciting! I can’t believe we both bought each other a present without even knowing. LOL. It’s like Christmas a month and a half early!”

Erebus walked hesitantly over to the large paper bag wrapped just for him, part of him nervous and another part trying to enjoy the moment. This was new; these feelings that went along with giving and receiving a gift. He kind of liked it and wanted it to stay. Aurora’s chatter about Christmas had him longing to be part of something over the holidays. A month away wasn’t really that far away. Could he convince himself to stay with her till then? *Good try, Erebus. You’ll use any excuse to stay near her.*

The rectangular present sat in front of him staring blankly at him. Impatience finally had him reach over and pull at the brown paper, ripping it. He tore the wrap off and stepped back in surprise.

“Do you like it?”

It was the stunning blown-up photo of Ithaca Falls. The one that had been hanging above Aurora’s bed. The one he’d noticed the first time he’d walked into her room.

“It’s amazing.”

“Thanks. I actually took the photo and had it enlarged. I had it hanging in my room, but I thought it suited you. It would look great in your apartment. You have hardly anything on the walls.” She paused and gave a nervous smile. “It reminds me of you.”

He stared at her and then back at the picture. “I love it. I know exactly where I’m going to hang it.”

“On the red brick wall in your bedroom?”

“Yeah, right above my bed.” He blinked, surprised she knew him that well.

“I thought it would look great there, too. Did you think it was a flat screen TV when you saw the package?”

“Uh...Sure.” He hadn’t known what to think. “You haven’t opened your present yet.” “Sorry. I was too excited to see the look on your face. I’m glad you like it.”

She bent her head down and opened the box. “This is beautiful. Wow. Thank you.” Her eyes lit up, and her smile spread ear to ear.

“You remind me of sunflowers.” He took the necklace to place it on her. She lifted her hair out of the way.

Kissing her neck, he tenderly slipped the chain on. He leaned forward to inhale her musky perfume scent and closed his eyes. He felt her turn and bring her lips to his. Mouths crushing with raw desire, he only wanted to think about this moment, not tomorrow or the next day or the next month. He wanted this feeling embedded into his memory forever.

“Aaron,” she whispered, adding a whimper when he brought his hands under her shirt and against her ribs, his fingers reaching around towards her back.

“Is Tori coming back here tonight?” His lips grazed her ear. He hadn’t even considered she might be in the apartment now.

“Hmmm...not sure, actually.” She pressed her body tight against his.

He slipped one arm around her shoulders and the other across her backside and scooped her up. She brought her arms around his neck and rested her head against his chest. He carried her to her bedroom, kicking the door shut with his foot, not even breaking stride. They collapsed on the bed together, a tangle of sheets, clothes, and pillows mixing everywhere.

After they lay with their naked bodies stretched facing each other, he traced the sunflower with his finger, following the chain and then along her collarbone. He let his finger follow down her arm, fascinated as goosebumps rose where he traced. He entwined his fingers with hers.

“What’re you doing for Christmas? Are you going to see your family?” Aurora’s thumb ran circles on his palm.

“I’ll be here.” He watched her hand.

“All by yourself? What about your family?” She leaned up on an elbow, her eyes searching his face.

He loved the way her hair fell down when she leaned forward. It enveloped her face, giving her that angelic look he’d fallen in love with. His breath caught. Was he really in love with her? If so, he knew things

weren't fine. They were both in danger if it was true. He exhaled, long and slow.

"Listen, if you don't want to talk about your family, that's fine. Just tell me so I don't keep asking. I'm not trying to piss you off." Aurora pulled her hand out of his.

He realized she'd mistaken his sigh. "I don't have any family. Coty is the closest thing I have." At least that wasn't a lie. He was going to need some time to figure out what his true feelings were. He knew they were screwed. He loved her without a shadow of a doubt.

"Sorry, I didn't know."

"It's okay. You don't need to apologize."

"What happened to them? You've never mentioned them. Did you have any brothers or sisters?"

"No."

"No?" She sat up, blowing her bangs off her face and pulling the sheet around her. "What happened to your parents?"

She wasn't going to let this go. Coty had said it would change. She'd start wanting to know the answers to questions he didn't know how to respond to. She'd know if he was lying, but he wasn't ready to risk telling her the truth. He wouldn't jeopardize her life on a slim chance she might believe him.

"Please, I don't want to talk about this now." Getting up from the bed, he untangled the sheets to find his clothes. He threw his shirt on and yanked on his jeans. Through his peripheral vision, he could see her leaning against the headboard, arms crossed and watching him, her face serious.

"I don't want to fight about this. It's Thanksgiving; I promised my folks I'd head home for the weekend. I'm flying out early tomorrow..." She let her unfinished sentence dangle in the air.

Had she mentioned she was flying to Texas? He couldn't remember. "I'm not mad." He leaned over to kiss her lightly. "You need to get a few hours sleep. How long –"

"Why don't you come with me?"

What? His breath caught and he almost choked on it. "I can't." "Why not?"

He bit the inside of his cheek. "It won't work. I can't get away."

“I’m going for just over a week but you could just come for the weekend so you wouldn’t miss any work. It’s a holiday so you wouldn’t have to miss any work.”

She wasn’t going to give up, and he actually liked her badgering. “Sorry, I just can’t. I’ll call you tomorrow night on your cell or you can text me when you’ve arrived. I’ll miss you but it’ll be great to see your family... I love you.” He froze. His heart stopped, and dead silence filled the room. Maybe he hadn’t said the last part out loud. Maybe he had just thought it. He hadn’t meant to say it. He barely understood the words, let alone ever said them or actually felt them.

“What did you say?”

Shit! He was such an idiot. Pulling on his shoes, he sat on the bed to tie them. He said nothing.

She let out a slow breath. “Don’t forget to take your picture. I really want you to have it.”

He stood, too embarrassed to look at her so he turned and headed toward the hall. “I won’t forget. It’s an awesome gift.” He was about to say I love the picture, but after what he’d just screwed up, the L-word was never going to enter his vocabulary again – ever.

“G’night, Aaron,” she said.

He couldn’t see her but he heard the smile in her voice. “Good night.” He slipped his jacket on and was already down the hall.

She went home for almost ten days. He spent the entire time alone and in complete misery. One, he missed her. Two, he knew he cared for her deeply and had to end it. Erebus didn’t think he could sink any lower.

Coty tried to get him to come out with him. He called, sent texts, and came banging on the door. One night, late after the bars had closed, he showed up with some girls. Erebus pretended he wasn’t there. Coty couldn’t tempt him. It just made him long to have Aurora back in his arms and in his bed.

She called him the night she got back. He’d almost knocked the couch over in his race to get the phone.

Aurora’s voice lightened his mood. She sounded so excited. “It’s great to hear your voice. I thought about you the entire time I was in Texas. I didn’t think I’d miss you that much, but I did.”

“Yeah, it was strange here without you too.” His cheeks burned when he thought about what he’d said to her before she left. *Damn it!* How he wished he could forget it or even better, erase it from both their memories.

“I’m picking you up in ten minutes. Meet me out front. Let’s go for a drive.” “Sounds good.”

Moments later, he stepped out into the brisk, cold night. Erebus inhaled. It was going to snow soon. Coty always said he had the ability to smell ice and snow. Probably a load of bull, but with Coty, you could never be too sure. The temperature had dropped close to freezing and the grey clouds in the sky seemed a sure sign for a fluffy downfall.

Erebus dropped his gaze at the sound of an engine. Aurora’s little black car came into sight, and she expertly pulled up to the curb, stopping inches beside him. He climbed in, grinning at her like the Cheshire Cat.

“Hi.”

“Hello.” He leaned over and kissed her lightly on the lips. He settled back awkwardly when he thought back to their last conversation before she left.

They drove in silence for a bit. Out of the corner of his eye, Erebus watched her drive. As always, she was stunning. However, there was something new in her face. The serious expression, her mouth set in a grim line and eyes darting his way were a sure sign of a confrontation about to come.

He shifted and stared straight ahead; a strange fluttering in his stomach made it too hard to watch her. Watching the shifting scenery as they drove, he realized where she was going before they were halfway there. Five minutes later she drove her little car around the park and settled in a spot with a good view of Falls Creek.

They both sat silent, with the engine idling. The sound of rushing water gave him a moment of courage. He turned to face her and watched her hands play with the belt on her coat, wrapping it around the steering wheel and wringing it in her hands. She stared at the dashboard, her eyebrows knitted together and lips pursed.

“What is it?” If she wanted to break up, she might as well get it over with. His chest grew tight, almost hurting, but he knew it would be best – for both of them.

She let out a long, slow breath, pushing it out through her nose. “I’ve been thinking about you over the holidays. Well,” she shrugged, “the little I do know about you.” She turned to him and seemed to push her shoulders back as she continued. “If we want this to work between us, I need to know about your family and your past. I can’t move forward without knowing who you are.” Her facial expression remained soft but serious.

A strange ringing started in his ears. What had she just said? The tightness in his chest left, but apparently moved up to his throat. He tapped his fingers silently against his knee. She wanted more? This wasn’t going to end tonight? He cleared his throat and tried to organize his thoughts. He wanted to be with her more than anything he’d ever wanted, but there were certain lines he didn’t think he could cross. “My life...I’m pretty complicated.”

“No more than the rest of us.” He said nothing.

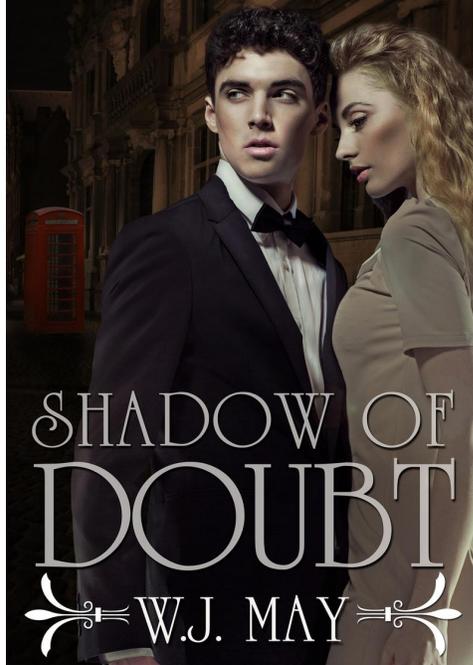
She squeezed the steering wheel and pushed her arms straight. The driver seat creaked in protest as her back pressed tight against it. “I’m not leaving this park until I get some answers. You won’t be seen with me during the day, you don’t answer my calls or texts during the day, and you’re never at your apartment. Trust me. I’ve tried to find you. You’re like a ghost.” She stared directly at him and shook her head. “None of it makes sense. You don’t make sense.”

He rubbed his hands and blew into them. The pain in his chest returned, gripped tight on his left side. This was how it was going to end, tonight.

Fearful, he watched Aurora cut the engine, stuff her keys into her pocket, and step out of the car into the cold night.

THE END ... of Part 1

When destiny takes over, that which was forbidden could destroy you.



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