



*The  
Iron Witch*

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# One

It all started with the party.

That's what Donna Underwood would tell herself in the days that followed. If only she hadn't let Nav talk her into going with him, then maybe everything would be different. Maybe things wouldn't have gotten quite so bad.

But Donna was a total pushover when it came to her best friend, Navin Sharma. All he had to do was gaze mournfully at her with those big brown eyes and she'd gladly follow him into Hell. Or in this case, into a strange house filled with a bunch of kids who thought she was the world's biggest freak.

Which was pretty much the same thing.

It was hardly her idea of a fun way to spend Saturday night in Ironbridge, especially not when most of this crowd was still attending the high school she'd been kicked out of last year. But Navin was determined to attend the "hottest party" this side of Thanksgiving, and he had been equally determined that she should go with him. This would be more than just a regular gathering, he'd assured her gleefully; it was a major event organized by some guy who'd graduated from Ironbridge High and already dropped out of college. His parents were disgustingly loaded—and on vacation—and the party had been talked about for weeks. Apparently, *everyone* would be there.

Which was exactly what she was afraid of.

Once inside, Donna grabbed the first opportunity to make herself as inconspicuous as possible. She found a dark corner of the living room and leaned awkwardly against the wall, fiddling with her silver scarf, retying it for what felt

like the hundredth time. With her embroidered blue jeans, black and silver T-shirt, and long, black velvet gloves, she looked a lot more sparkly than she felt. It didn't help that she'd already begun the day unsettled and jittery, woken by the familiar weight of cold dread. The dreams always left her that way.

Earlier that evening, she and Navin had jumped off the bus at Central Station and set off in the direction of the Grayson townhouse. As the city closed in around them, all energy and iron, Donna had felt the thrum of power beneath her feet. Her adrenaline spiked, and the accompanying rush of blood left her light-headed. Her iron-laced hands and arms throbbed in unison to the beat of the city's heart. And she knew that if she wanted to, she could shatter the bones of Navin's hand without breaking a sweat.

Donna was marked by magic. And not just any magic, but an ancient alchemical magic that had lain hidden behind legends for centuries. Yet knowing what she could do didn't make her feel special. It didn't make her feel powerful. All it did was make her feel completely and utterly alone.

But she wasn't alone tonight; she was letting Navin pull her through the streets while trying to pretend she wasn't completely terrified. Her fingers curled reflexively inside her favorite gloves as she resisted the temptation to flee.

"Stop being so cranky, Underwood. You're just nervous." Navin could barely keep the amusement out of his voice. He patted the back of her hand before releasing her.

Donna scowled. "What the hell have I got to be nervous about?"

Navin gave her his best "duh" look.

She punched him playfully on the shoulder, harder than she'd intended to. Her gloves might hide her tattoos—those strange symbols she refused to show even to Navin—but they did nothing to hide how strong she really was. Just one of the many secrets she was forced to keep. "The public story" about her arms and hands was that she'd had multiple skin grafts after being burnt in a fire. She hated the lies, but it wasn't as though she'd had much choice (that's what she tried to tell herself, anyway). And she always had to be so careful not to show her strength; she'd spent the last three years of living next door to Navin terrified that she'd do something to hurt him.

"Ow! Take it easy, Wonder Girl." Navin rubbed his biceps, then flexed it to

show off his impressive lack of muscle.

“Sorry.” Donna couldn’t resist grinning. Navin was such an idiot sometimes, and she loved him for it. Still, despite their closeness, there was so much she hadn’t told him about her family and about the Order of the Dragon. Like ... pretty much *all* of it. And not because she wasn’t supposed to tell (which she wasn’t), but because she wanted to protect him.

He slung an easy arm around her shoulders as they crossed the street, making it just before the *Don’t Walk* sign flashed back up. “Come on, Don. Something’s up, I know you too well.”

She shrugged, unable to meet his eyes.

“Don’t panic—I’m not going to interrogate you right now. You can tell me all about it at the party.”

Donna grimaced. “I can’t wait.”

Navin fixed her with a mock glare. “You just don’t want to go.”

She pulled a face. “No, *really*? Partying with the ‘elite’ isn’t exactly my idea of a good time, and they’re not going to be happy when I walk through the door. You’re taking your reputation in your hands being seen at a party with me.”

“So young, and yet so cynical.”

“It’s true and you know it.”

Navin laughed. “What ‘reputation’ have I got to worry about? I slip under a lot of people’s cool-dar, that’s all. I’m different, but not different enough for them to bother with tormenting me.”

“Like they do with me, you mean.” Donna pouted.

He steered her past a homeless guy, wearing an AC/DC T-shirt and a ratty, floor-length coat, standing in the middle of the sidewalk. Other pedestrians flowed by him like water around a stone. “Come on, stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

“Can we leave when I’m not having fun anymore?” Donna hoped she didn’t sound as needy and vulnerable as she felt.

“Sure, we can leave. Of course, that means you actually have to *have* some fun before we can even consider going home ... ” Navin ruffled her hair and grinned, ducking so she couldn’t hit him again.

That same grin now beamed across the dimly lit room at her, a room crowded

with teenagers having that elusive “fun.” Donna pulled back her shoulders and lifted her chin, scanning the clusters of kids she vaguely knew but wished she didn’t. She’d spent most of her life trying to fit in, but it was so much harder ever since “the Incident.” In the wake of that event, she’d left Ironbridge High to be home-schooled by the Order ... everyone considered it best that she only appear for exams, and special arrangements had been made. And so here she was now, surrounded by a bunch of kids she once knew, kids who thought she was the worst kind of loser. A loser with a capital *L*. A freak.

Although it was a totally hopeless task, Donna had promised Nav she would at least *try* to blend into this scene. And it wasn’t like she had anything else to do. She’d rather be home right now with Aunt Paige, but her aunt was on a business trip to Boston and wouldn’t be back until late.

Navin caught her eye from across the room again and smiled, white teeth flashing against his burnt cinnamon skin. His black hair was neat today, smoothed straight back and falling to the collar of his ever-present, black and red, fake leather biker’s jacket (apparently a mandatory accessory for riding his beaten-up old bicycle through the busy Ironbridge streets like he was on a Motocross track).

Nodding and trying to return his smile, Donna hoped Navin hadn’t noticed how miserable she was. She didn’t want to spoil this for him. But honestly, why did he bother? Her ex-school friends would never accept her. In fact, she’d been offered proof of this the minute they’d walked through the front door of the party. The first thing Melanie Swan had said to her—*about* her, more accurately—was directed to Navin. “What did you have to bring the *freak* for?”

It was only Navin’s restraining hand on her arm that had stopped Donna from shoving the bottle of whatever Melanie was drinking straight down the girl’s throat. Or perhaps somewhere even more painful, she reflected grimly. Navin had glanced a warning at her, then taken the inexplicably popular class president to task for being nasty to a good friend of his. “I would’ve expected more from you, Mel,” he’d said, his voice unusually sharp. “You’re supposed to be setting an example. And I mean, a good one.”

Unbelievably, Melanie had eaten it up and apologized. To Navin, of course, not to Donna herself. She’d twiddled her bright blonde hair and started acting

almost girly around him.

Donna had felt a stab of irritation. Was she flirting with him? Gross.

Shaking her head to clear it of that unpleasant image, Donna reached for the nearest drink, then realized it had alcohol in it and put it back down again. She didn't want to go against Aunt Paige's rules tonight, especially when it was so important to keep a clear head. She couldn't afford to lose her temper again and give these people more reason to hate her. Not because she cared what they thought; if she never saw any of them ever again, it would be too soon. But she cared for Navin's sake.

People like Melanie Swan made it so hard, though.

The crush of bodies and voices was overwhelming. The music beat a steady rhythm in Donna's temples and through the soles of her feet. Excited students greeted each other with high-pitched shrieks or back-slapping, accompanied by whoops and hollers. Jettisoning any idea she might have had of "fitting in," Donna worked her way over to Navin. She hung around the edges of his conversations for a while ... for as long as she could bear to feel like a burden.

It was time to make her escape. Thinking that maybe it would be quieter on the top floor, Donna yelled in Navin's ear that she was going to find a bathroom. When he'd understood and nodded, she left him to his shouted conversation with a couple of wannabe bikers. Head ringing, she moved away from the boom of the speakers, squeezed past a couple making out on the main stairway, and worked her way up to the top floor.

Things were just as crowded here as they had been downstairs. Bedroom doors were closed, and she could hear sounds behind them that made her blush and step quickly away. There was a line for the bathroom, headed by some shrill girls she used to know. Ducking into the only open doorway in an effort to avoid her ex-classmates, Donna hoped she wasn't walking in on anything she'd rather not witness.

Thankfully, the bedroom was empty. A feeling of peace descended on her, and she wondered how this haven of quiet had escaped the hordes of partiers.

Then Donna's fingers tingled, and for a moment she thought she could sense magic.

She froze, just inside the doorway, and tried to quiet her mind while allowing

her senses to reach out further than might be considered ... normal. When you'd grown up surrounded by magic, it was hard *not* to develop a sensitivity to it. It was no wonder that the members of the Order were so keen to train her in their ancient alchemical arts.

After a moment, Donna closed the door behind her and looked around for signs of anything *other*. Things felt pretty ordinary now, and she wondered if she'd imagined that whisper of magic.

The bedroom was quite masculine, done out in cappuccino and chocolate tones, with earthy rusts thrown in for contrast in the curtains and lamps. The lights were on, but dimmed to a warm glow. There was a black guitar gathering dust in one corner, like some relic of an emo adolescence, and a desk in the other corner, on which sat what looked like a very expensive computer. The walk-in closet hidden behind dark double doors was probably huge, and there was even an en-suite bathroom.

Donna felt a cool breeze caress the back of her neck and shivered, wishing she still had her coat on. Peeking behind one of the heavy curtains, she saw a set of ornate French doors. One of the doors stood slightly ajar. Further investigation revealed a small balcony and an iron stepladder that lead toward the roof.

*Why not?*

She could use some air, even if it was chilled, near-winter air. Tugging her gloves up as far as they'd go—almost covering her elbows—Donna slipped out onto the tiny balcony and gripped the metal railings.

She pulled herself up onto the first step, feeling unsteady on what was little more than a fire escape. Her sequined sneakers squeaked on the rungs and she could hear distant traffic passing beneath her feet. As she approached the top and realized just how high up she really was, she had a dizzying moment of vertigo. Her gloves slipped on the metal rungs and she held on tight, for once grateful for the magically enhanced strength in her hands.

And then a head poked over the edge of the roof. Donna found herself inches away from the striking face of a young guy who'd obviously found the same escape route she had. His dark blond hair seemed bright under the clear night sky.

"I wondered how long it would take for someone to come and ruin the peace

and quiet up here,” he drawled, in a flat, bored sort of voice.

Donna saw the hand-rolled cigarette in his fingers, at the same time catching a whiff of something sweet and sickly. It reminded her of when her aunt burnt sage to cleanse the house.

“Well, come on then, if you’re going to,” he added. He placed the cigarette in the corner of his mouth and extended both hands.

Donna had a moment of doubt, suddenly wishing she were back downstairs with Navin. But she shook it off. Surely sitting with this guy couldn’t be any worse than hanging out with Melanie and her clones.

She allowed herself to be pulled the rest of the way up onto the roof.

# Two

Donna sat on a narrow bench bolted to the roughly hewn roof-deck. Her new companion sat at her feet, directly on the platform built onto the roof, leaning against what looked like a protective railing. She shifted uncomfortably in the silence and watched him as he flicked away the butt of whatever he'd been smoking.

He tilted his head until they were looking into one another's eyes.

Donna's chest felt tight, and a strange, watery feeling sloshed around in her stomach. His eyes were the greenest she had ever seen. Viridian-bright, but with textures swirling within that looked like fresh moss on the bark of a tree. She wondered if he was cold in his thin lilac shirt (and how many guys could get away with *that* color?), then saw a black sweater discarded at his side. His toffee-colored hair was a shade or two lighter than hers, short at the back and longer on top so that it fell choppily into those otherworldly eyes. His skin was smooth and golden, as if he'd just returned from vacation.

"Aren't you scared of falling?" Donna almost jumped at the sound of her own voice.

Just for a second, the guy looked as though he might smile. Instead, he leaned his head back, resting it against the peeling, black-painted iron railing. He stared straight up into the star-filled sky.

"Well?" Donna prodded. "Aren't you?"

"No."

"Oh."

She continued to watch him. Why had she even come up here? This whole evening had been a huge mistake.

But she couldn't help gazing at his wide mouth, with its full bottom lip, and letting her imagination go crazy. She had a sudden picture in her head of kissing this unknown boy. Well, not exactly a *boy* ... he looked older than her by at least a couple of years. She knew that his lips would be soft but insistent, that lazy half-smile suddenly transformed into something more intense.

She shook her head, squeezing her eyes tightly shut, then looked back at him. His eyebrows were raised in what could have been either curiosity or amusement—Donna couldn't tell which. She blushed, and instantly hated herself for having such a childish reaction.

“What were you thinking about just then?”

Donna pulled her knees up against her chest and wrapped her arms around them. “Nothing.”

“Nothing. Right.” He made that last word stretch out for a lot longer than was polite.

Donna tossed her hair and looked away, clenching her black-gloved hands into fists against her jeans.

His burst of laughter took her by surprise. What surprised her even more was that the next moment they were laughing together. She wondered how she knew that he was someone who laughed as rarely as she did. It felt like he knew this too, and that they were sharing a secret moment of humor they could hide from other people, keep just between the two of them—strangers united in an unspoken contract of ... *something*. It was exhilarating and scary.

Getting her breathing back under control, Donna looked over at her companion once more. “So, what's your name?”

“Xan. Yours?”

“I'm Donna. Underwood.” She cringed inwardly at the sound of her voice. Why did she always have to sound so *young* ? “Is your name short for Alexander?”

“Ah. Beautiful *and* wise, this Donna Underwood.”

She could have felt offended at his tone, but she noticed the glint in his eyes and decided it was nice to be teased by someone other than Navin.

“You’re not enjoying the party, then?” she asked.

“I should hope not.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He shifted his position slightly, making it easier for him to look up at her.

“Well, it wouldn’t do to enjoy one’s own party, would it?”

Donna found herself blushing again. “Oh, you’re Alexander Grayson.”

“Pleased to meet you,” he replied, smiling that strange half-smile again. “I’d be even more pleased if you’d come down here with me. I’m getting an appalling crick in my neck.”

She wanted to say something cool and sophisticated, maybe even ask him why he wanted to sit on the edge of the roof, why he couldn’t come join her on the bench instead, but there was something in his voice that made her hesitate ... a vulnerability hovering just beneath the surface that made her wonder about him. She slid down onto the platform and tried to figure out where he was from. He had a vaguely British accent, it seemed, with a touch of Bostonian around the vowels and maybe something else, too. Something a little more exotic.

She tucked her legs beneath her and settled down a short distance from Xan.

“That’s better,” he said. “It’s not as cold once you get down here.”

Donna did feel cold. She was acutely aware of her short sleeves, with only the velvet of her gloves offering the illusion of warmth. She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself tightly, feeling unbearably shy as this stranger watched.

Xan held out the sweater she’d noticed earlier. “Here, put this on.”

She hesitated, but only for a moment. “Thanks.” Quickly pulling the still-warm material over her head, she tried not to be too obvious as she took in the scent of the sweater’s owner. Deodorant or aftershave, perhaps; cigarette smoke; and something else, something that spoke of moss and trees and wide open fields of swaying grass. Frowning, she met his curious gaze and tried to tidy her dishevelled hair.

“So,” he said. “What high school do you go to?”

Hating that he’d immediately guessed her age, Donna tried to keep the frown off her face. “I don’t.”

He raised golden-brown eyebrows. “You’re in college?”

“No, I’m home-schooled. I’m a senior. I still have to go to Ironbridge High for

exams and stuff, but other than that I'm out of the rabble."

His lips quirked. "Can't blame you for that. Why home-schooled?"

"Let's just say I had a disagreement with a significant portion of the student body."

"Ah." Xan shifted so that his body turned toward her, then stretched long arms above his head and yawned loudly. Donna wasn't fooled by his lazy movements and sleepy eyes—this guy was sharp, underneath the laid-back exterior.

"What about you?" she asked.

"What *about* me?"

"You know, schools, colleges ... " She let the question drift off. Maybe it would be rude to let on that she knew he'd dropped out of college.

"I went away to college last year. Things didn't work out." He fixed her with his emerald gaze. "But you probably knew that already."

She ignored the sudden blush warming her cheeks. "I'd heard something, but I don't make a habit of listening to gossip—especially because I'm usually the subject of it."

He gazed at her for a long moment. "I'd love to hear what people say about you, Donna Underwood."

She bit her lip and changed the subject. "So, what are you doing up here when the party's down there? Shouldn't you be playing host or something?"

His laugh echoed with bitterness. "Yeah, like I'm the perfect host."

"What does *that* mean?"

"Nothing. I just agree to stupid things when I'm bored."

There was silence. Donna fiddled with the sleeve of Xan's sweater. She didn't know what to say anymore, and was again regretting coming up here. She thought of Navin, downstairs with the crowd, and wished they could just go home. If she hadn't left her cell phone in her coat pocket, she'd be able to check the time. Her stomach clenched as she pictured her aunt's return home and remembered her standard weekend curfew.

"What time is it?"

Xan pulled out his cell. "Not long 'til midnight, Cinderella."

She smiled at that. "I actually do have to go soon. I only have an hour before I'm supposed to be home. And my friend is probably looking for me."

He nodded. "I hope I didn't scare you off. I can be a little—" He hesitated. "A little bit eccentric, I guess."

"Do you work at that, then?" Donna teased.

"Only when I want to impress pretty girls."

*Pretty?* Was this ridiculously hot guy calling *her* pretty? Donna started to get up, but his hand on her arm stopped her.

"Why do you wear the gloves?" he asked. "It's not just fashion, is it?"

Donna attempted a light tone. "You think I'd wear these for *fashion*?"

He conceded her point with a slight smile. "Seriously, though. Why?"

Her heart contracted and she found it difficult to breathe. Why did she feel so compelled to tell this guy the truth? She looked down at her covered hands. "Because I'm different," she said finally, her voice barely audible.

"Me too," he replied, almost as softly.

They looked at one another again, Donna's somber gray eyes gazing into his green. Stone and forest. Iron and leaf.

"I knew that ... " she began slowly. "I know things about people, sometimes." Her intuition had always been good.

The corner of Xan's mouth quirked upwards. "What do you know about me?"

Donna closed her eyes for a moment.

Unbidden memories flooded her, pushing into her mind with a cold weight that took her breath away. Memories of a dark and whispering wood, a clearing, and the sound of death following at her heels. *Her* memories, not his. At least, she thought they were her memories.

She pushed the images away and opened her eyes to find Xan watching her with curiosity.

It had been a long time since she'd allowed herself to think about what had happened to her in the Ironwood. She dreamt of it most nights, but to see it so clearly just now, when she was awake ... Donna trembled, hoping Xan didn't notice, and tried to smile.

"Well, you're tough to read," she managed to reply. Why were memories of Ironwood Forest coming to her so easily right now, when she was trying to focus on Xan? The mood had changed, and she felt as though she was on the edge of something important and scary.

“You are too, Miss Donna Underwood.” He dug into a pocket and pulled out a small tin of tobacco. “Hey, do you smoke?”

“*Ew*, no way.” The words were out before she could stop them.

Xan didn’t seem offended. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he began to open the tin. His fingers were long and tanned, and there was a fluid grace to his movements ... an intense energy that made Donna feel breathless as she watched him. He wasn’t like anyone she’d ever met before.

“You really are different, aren’t you?” She cringed inwardly after she spoke, wondering what had possessed her to say that. Maybe it was the vulnerable look on his face. Or the way he tried to hide things, yet seemed to want to invite her into his world.

He nodded, very slowly. “I guess we all have secrets. Like you’re hiding something with those gloves.”

Her eyes slid away first. She couldn’t do it—she just couldn’t quite bring herself to reach out to this person. She’d only just met him; *what is wrong with me?* she thought. Here she was, tempted to spill the secret of how her hands had been magically remade, spill it just as easily as the kids downstairs spilled beer on the carpet. She bit her lip and kept her mouth shut.

Xan shifted to a cross-legged position and began filling a cigarette paper with tobacco. “It seems the sharing has ended.” His voice had gone flat again; the drawling tone had returned.

Donna stood up too quickly and the rush of dizziness almost overwhelmed her. “I really should go. I have to get a cab.”

“Of course,” Xan replied, tucking the newly made cigarette behind one ear. “I’ll help you climb down.”

She backed away before his hovering hand could touch her. “No thanks, I can do it myself.”

But he followed her anyway.

When they were back in the bedroom below, Donna didn’t know what to say. Something about Xan made her feel connected, even though she knew almost nothing about him. She was often comforted by the sense of connection she felt with Navin; Navin made her feel like she actually had some semblance of a normal life (whatever that was). But this was different.

*Xan* was different.

Donna wriggled out of the black sweater, feeling suddenly overheated and awkward as she handed it back to Xan. Her eyes wandered to the digital clock by the side of the unmade bed. *His* bed. “Crap. I really have to go. Navin will be looking for me.”

“Navin?” His eyebrows shot up. “Ah, the boyfriend.” He made it a statement.

“No, just a friend.” She shrugged. “My best friend, actually.”

“Oh.” Xan rubbed a hand across his face. “Can I call you? I think we have a lot more to talk about ... ” Just for a moment, he sounded uncertain of himself. It gave Donna the courage to take a chance.

“Sure.” She reeled off her number and he punched buttons on his cell phone.

When Xan stepped toward her, though, she found herself wanting to run. Just who the hell *was* Alexander Grayson? But she forced herself to stand her ground. Xan reached out a hand, and she held her breath as he gently moved back a strand of hair that had fallen into her eyes, tucking it behind her ear.

Warmth spread through her body as she attempted a smile. Donna realized, for the first time, that she had to look up to meet his eyes. He was tall. Taller than Nav, she thought, and immediately felt disloyal.

Xan’s hand dropped to her shoulder as they watched each other. And then his retreating fingers brushed her arm, right where the edge of her black glove met the white skin of her elbow.

There was a sudden *spark*, like static electricity—only a lot stronger.

Donna jerked away from Xan’s touch as an aching filled her hands and arms. It was like a cramp, but an impossible sensation that attacked bone rather than muscle. She remembered the pain of her childhood—multiple “operations” on her disfigured arms as Maker worked on her with metal and magic, and the expression on Aunt Paige’s face when she visited after each procedure.

“What the hell was that?” Xan was looking at her as if she was something both precious and dangerous. His voice was pitched low, and his eyes flashed in the dimly lit room. He rubbed his hands together as though they were cold and glanced at the half-open door.

Donna swallowed. “What was *what*?” The ache in her bones was now more like a tingling sensation that spread throughout her arms. She needed to get out

of here. Whatever had just happened between them, she would think about it later, when she didn't have to breathe under the intensity of Xan's gaze.

He scowled. "You felt it too. Don't tell me you didn't feel it."

Donna took a step toward the door. "It was just an electric shock. No big deal."

For a moment, she wondered if he was actually going to try to stop her from leaving. Her heart pounded and she resisted the temptation to rub her arm.

But Alexander Grayson just stood and watched her, almost as though he might be able to look *into* her if he tried hard enough.

Donna walked quickly toward the door, glancing back only once as she let herself out. She headed downstairs in search of Navin.



Navin, predictably, was furious with her. "Where have you been? I've been searching everywhere for you. I called your phone, like, a hundred times."

Donna couldn't help thinking he sounded like a parent who'd lost his child at the shopping mall, but she managed to keep her smile under wraps. "Don't exaggerate," she replied, checking the missed calls on her cell as she tucked herself into her coat. Her eyebrows lifted when she saw just how many phone calls she'd missed. "Oh. You did call a few times, didn't you?"

"Of course I did!" Navin practically exploded. "I didn't know what to think. I started to wonder if Melanie and her minions had gotten hold of you."

His concern was touching but Donna felt strangely distant from him, as though everything was happening through a filter, like a blind had been drawn down over her emotions so she didn't have to feel things so sharply.

"I'm sorry, Nav," she said, "but what did you think Melanie would do to me? Looks like you have her eating out of the palm of your hand, anyway." There was also the fact that Melanie Swan hadn't messed with her directly since the infamous Incident. Donna tried to think of something else, yet the memory kept pushing its way up into her mind like a stubborn weed.

"Shut up, Underwood. Don't try distracting me; you're in big trouble." Navin pointed to the dial on his watch. "*Shit*. And there's going to be even bigger trouble for you if we don't get home in the next half hour."

Donna frowned. “It’s not like Aunt Paige is going to boil me alive ... ”

“I wouldn’t be too sure. Last time you came home late with me, she threatened to hex me.”

“She was kidding!” Okay, so her aunt liked to cultivate a quirky alternative/New Age type of persona for those outside the Order, but sometimes Nav took it a bit too seriously. He was half-convinced that Paige was a modern witch—which wasn’t a million miles from the truth. Sort of.

“Look, I *said* I was sorry for worrying you.” Donna tried to steer the conversation away from her aunt.

Navin put a casual arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze; she knew all was forgiven. “What were you doing, anyway?”

“I was getting some air, up on the roof.”

“On the *roof*?”

She smiled. “Where better?”

He shook his head, smiling faintly. “You’re weird, you know that?”

Donna looked at him innocently as they headed toward the front door. “I thought that was why you hung out with me.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly why.” Navin rolled his eyes. “Come on, I called a cab already.”

She laughed and opened the front door, but hesitated when footsteps hurried down the long hallway behind them.

“Donna, hold up a sec!”

Turning around slowly, Donna saw Xan holding out her silver scarf. Her hand went to her throat; she’d been missing it for a while. Had it fallen off when they were on the roof?

Xan pushed too-long bangs out of his eyes. “You dropped this.”

Navin looked between the two of them, an expression on his face that Donna had never seen before. She felt her cheeks warm and hated that she suddenly felt *guilty*. It wasn’t like she’d done anything wrong.

She snatched her scarf from Xan with a mumbled acknowledgement, hoping nobody noticed how her hands were trembling. That bone-deep, weary ache had returned, making her wish she could just wrap her arms around her body and wait for the pain to pass. The sensation—like her bones were grinding together

—brought sudden tears to her eyes. Blinking them away and trying to look like nothing was wrong, Donna wound the scarf around her neck with stiff fingers.

Xan smiled. “That looks good with your coat.”

“Um ... thanks.” She shuffled her feet and decided she would have to introduce the guys. She touched Navin’s hand. “Nav, this is Xan—Alexander Grayson,” she began. “We met upstairs. Xan, this is my friend Navin Sharma.”

They sized each other up, the way that guys seem to do so well. Then Navin reached out his hand. “Pleased to meet you.” His voice sounded anything but. What on earth’s gotten into him, Donna wondered, although she was grateful to see him at least making an effort.

Xan shook Nav’s hand. “Likewise. I hope you had a good time?”

“Yeah, it was cool. Thanks.”

The beat from the music pumping out of the living room vibrated through the soles of Donna’s sneakers. Nobody said anything as Xan switched his attention back to her. He was watching her with that strange, curious expression, as if she were a new species he’d just discovered. She wanted to tell him it was rude to stare, but there was no way she’d do that in front of Nav.

There was a crash from the main room and Xan cringed. “Bastards! Now what have they broken?”

Navin’s gaze slid over to Donna and their eyes met. His eyebrows were raised, and she almost giggled. *Saved by some clumsy kids*, she thought.

“Sorry,” Xan said. He ran a hand through his hair again. “I’d better see what those morons are up to.”

Donna nodded. “Okay, thanks again.”

Xan walked back in the direction of the ominous clattering sounds. “I’ll call you,” he threw over his shoulder.

Donna wanted to disappear into the alcohol pooled on the carpet. What did he have to say that for? Men were such idiots.

She glanced at Navin and was relieved to see that he didn’t seem to have a reaction. Maybe he hadn’t heard. Yeah, she could hope ...

They let themselves out of the house. Donna toed an empty bottle out of the way and glanced across the street. She eyed the darkness; did something move? Then a skinny shadow ducked behind a wall and she almost gasped. Her mouth

was suddenly dry and she stopped walking.

“What’s up?” Navin had his hand on the heavy iron gate at the end of the front walk, ready to step out onto the sidewalk.

“Wait.” Donna grabbed his arm; she squeezed too tightly, and winced.

Navin frowned and made a big show of rubbing his arm. He studied her face for a moment. “Donna, what is it?”

She scanned the street, swallowing past the lump in her throat. Her heart was pounding. *There! There it was again.* A small silhouette moved with uncanny grace, sliding between shadows as it climbed over the wall into the next yard.

“Did you see that? Something just went over that wall, I *saw* it.” She was whispering and she knew she must sound crazy, but she couldn’t help it. Whatever she’d just seen slipping through the shadows was a lot more sinister than a super-big cat.

“There’s nothing there, Donna.” Navin fixed her with a strange look. “Are you sure you haven’t been drinking?”

“Shut up, you know I haven’t.”

“Actually, I have no way of knowing that, considering how you decided to spend most of the evening wandering around on the roof.” He raised an eyebrow, something Donna had always wished she could do. The single-eyebrow raise was, sadly, not something she had ever been able to master. Not even with Nav’s expert tutoring.

“Oh, just forget it.” Donna let out the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. “Maybe I really *am* going nuts.”

“Going nuts? I’m sorry to inform you that it’s far too late for that, Underwood.”

Donna resisted the temptation to demonstrate just how strong she really was. But she couldn’t hold back a sigh of relief when their cab pulled up. At least Navin was teasing her again—the tension that had formed between them when Xan was around seemed to have lifted. She looked over her shoulder as she climbed into the back seat, knowing she wouldn’t feel happy until they’d gotten out of there.

She was almost certain that something had been watching them from across the street. The crawling sensation in her stomach stayed with her all the way

home.

DONNA UNDERWOOD'S JOURNAL:

*Whenever I think of “the Incident” at Ironbridge High School—the one everyone remembers but pretends they don’t—I get a horrible feeling in my stomach. Like nerves, but a lot worse. More painful. I feel ashamed of my behavior, and yet I was also standing up for myself, which can’t be a completely bad thing. Right?*

*I just wish people would forget for real—like, have their minds magically wiped or something—rather than have to pretend it didn’t happen. Events that can’t be explained rationally are best left alone. But kids like Melanie Swan don’t easily forget being made to look stupid in front of their friends.*

*All I wanted—all I’d ever wanted—was to get through my days at school quietly. It was bad enough being different because of wearing the gloves the whole time; just standing out that way makes you feel uncomfortable. Some students thought I was trying to make a “fashion statement” and made snide remarks about it when they thought I couldn’t hear. Melanie, though, didn’t care whether I could hear or not. Sometimes she would just ask me to my face, “What’s up with your hands, Underwood? Trying to stop biting your nails?” Or, “How do you manage to hold a pen with those things on?” And I would blush and hate myself for it, turning away and hiding behind Navin. I tried to ignore her—managed it pretty well for almost two years.*

*But once people figured out the gloves weren’t just for show—that I was given special permission to wear them because of something that had happened to me—Melanie’s curiosity got the better of her. To be fair to her, she wasn’t the only one, but there’s always a ringleader with these things. I was excused from some sports activities and she hated that (she was probably born with pom-poms attached to her hands). She just couldn’t stand it that I was treated differently.*

*Anyway, Navin wasn’t at school that day for whatever reason, and I was rummaging in my locker trying to find a textbook I was sure I’d shoved in there the day before. Melanie came up behind me and pushed me so that I stumbled, banging my head on the locker.*

*So, I was trying to pull myself back out of my locker when I felt two pairs of hands grabbing me on either side, holding me in position so I couldn't get out and stand up straight. And then someone else grabbed my right hand and started pulling off my glove.*

*I still remember the rush of adrenaline that filled me. It was like a heat wave that started in my pounding heart, spread throughout my body, and made my head buzz with caged energy. I wanted their hands off me. I didn't want anyone to see my hands and arms.*

*I heard Melanie's voice—"Look, there's something here!" And that was it. I just lost it. I wrenched my right hand free, for a moment not even caring if the glove came off, and gripped the edges of the locker with both hands. I pushed, using all the strength in my arms and hands—pushed myself upright with such force that I threw off whoever had been holding me.*

*And then I stood facing Melanie Swan, and a pretty big group of friends and curious bystanders. Someone said, "Look at her locker," in an awed voice, and I swung around to look along with everyone else.*

*The door was open, but where I'd gripped the sides of it, you could see clear handprints indented into the metal. It was like paper that had been crumpled up without a second thought, the steel edges collapsing in on themselves.*

*"What kind of a freak are you, Underwood?" Melanie asked, staring at me. Her perfect blue eyes were filled with disdain and—I was pleased to note—fear. "I always knew there was something weird about you."*

*"Leave me alone," was all I could think to say. My hands were shaking pretty badly, but I managed to close the door of my half-crushed locker, knowing there wasn't a chance in hell it would shut properly and not even caring. I just wanted an excuse to turn away from the expressions on all of those faces. The door hung at a slight angle, looking drunken and forlorn in the row of upright lockers.*

*But Melanie still hadn't got enough of me. I glanced around desperately, hoping for a miracle in the form of a passing teacher, but it didn't seem I was in luck that day.*

*She put one pale, perfectly manicured hand in the center of my chest and pushed me against the locker door. Her fingernails matched my crimson gloves. “Stay out of my way, freak.”*

*I don’t know if it was her calling me “freak” again, or if it was the slow and exaggerated way she pushed me. I don’t know if I was still buzzing with adrenaline. Whatever it was, something inside of me snapped.*

*I stepped as close to her as I could get without treading on her delicate toes. “You’ve got it the wrong way around. You stay the hell out of my way.”*

*I turned to the locker, drew back my fist, and punched it as hard as I could.*

*With an ear-splitting shriek of metal, the whole door collapsed inwards, wrecking the locker beyond any hope of repair. There was a collective gasp from the small audience and I was gratified to see Melanie back up a few steps, eyes wide and staring.*

*I took a few paces toward her. “That’s what you’ll get if you bother me again.” I turned on my heel and walked away on shaking legs, not caring that people parted before me like the Red Sea. Not caring that they were shocked and afraid.*

*At that moment, all I gave a damn about was that I had won.*

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