



KATANA

COLE GIBSEN

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1

I stepped outside the department store and felt something squish against my heel where concrete should have been. “Oh no.”

“What’s wrong?” My best friend Quentin shoved the last bit of a soft pretzel into his mouth and passed through the automatic doors, joining me under the mall’s awning. The St. Louis summer night enveloped us like a towel pulled too soon from the dryer, causing beads of sweat to form along my forehead and plaster stray hairs along my cheeks in blond lines.

“You tell me.” Balancing the large box I held, I closed my eyes and lifted my foot. “How bad is it?”

Quentin sucked in a sharp breath, rattling the chain hanging from his pocket. “A big ol’ wad of bubblicious bad.”

Opening my eyes, I dared a look. Sure enough, a line of gum stretched from my new DC skate shoe to the sidewalk. “Crapstastic! These shoes cost seventy dollars.” I scraped the bottom of my sneaker against the edge of the sidewalk, but it did little more than turn the pink wad of gum into a black wad of gum. “Maybe I have time to run back inside and grab some napkins?”

As if in answer, the night security guard locked the door behind us.

Groaning, I shifted my grip on the box. “This stupid toaster is ruining my life!”

“I don’t think the toaster has it out for you,” Quentin said, batting a moth away from his face. “It could be karma. Or it could be your own guilty conscious for trying to kill your mom via a credit card statement.” He nodded to the chrome, digital, top-of-the-line monstrosity I’d chosen for my cousin’s wedding. “Seriously, two hundred dollars for a toaster? Was that thing even on the gift registry?”

“It’s chrome, Q. *Chrome*. How could we show our faces at the wedding with some pathetic stainless steel toaster in hand? People would talk.”

He laughed. “*Uh-huh*. Denial isn’t just a river in Egypt, you know.”

I looked at him and huffed. “Seriously, Dr. Q? Can you lay off the head shrinking just for tonight?”

He shrugged. “I’ll try and contain myself.”

After several more attempts to scrape the lump off of my heel, I gave up. “Good. Our last day as juniors—we should be celebrating with the rest of our class, not hanging outside the mall while I destroy the cutest pair of skate shoes in existence.”

“Relax,” Quentin said. “You know the party doesn’t *officially* start until we arrive.” He looped his arm through mine and we made our way along the sidewalk. We fell into step behind an elderly couple who had been in the checkout line ahead of us.

“Yeah? You wanna know what *does* start?” I said. “Your stupid sister putting the moves on that hot transfer student Whitley Noble because I’m not there to stop her.”

Angry heat rushed through my veins as I recalled our earlier run-in with Quentin’s twin sister Carly. She had stood fluffing her chocolate-colored hair and puckering freshly glossed lips in the mirror at Clinique’s display counter when Quentin and I rounded the corner.

“Raleigh and Q!” she’d said. “Can’t wait to see you at the party tonight. If you run late, I’ll make sure to tell Whitley ‘*Hi*’ for you.” Then she planted two sticky kisses on either side of our faces before dashing off, leaving Quentin and me scrambling for makeup remover and cotton balls.

“Don’t worry about Carly.” Quentin’s voice dissolved the memory. “I don’t know what her disorder is, but I’m sure it’s hard to pronounce.”

Laughing, I shifted the bulky appliance against my hip.

Quentin glanced at the leather cuff on his wrist that was also a watch. “There is one problem, though. By now, the wine coolers have started to work their magic on Carly and her friends. If we don’t get there soon, we’re not going to witness—and more importantly, make fun of—all of their bad choices. I’ll bet you five bucks they’re dancing on the tables by eleven.”

“You’re on! I’m giving them until ten-thirty.” I reached into my pocket and engaged my skinny jeans in a game of tug-of-war until I finally pulled the car keys free. Quentin sped into a trot and dragged me behind like a three-legged mule. I struggled to keep up, giggling each time I had to stop to adjust the toaster that slipped lower in my grip with each step.

Hearing our commotion, the older couple in front of us shot us the stink eye as they walked on. The woman was so focused on perfecting her pinched-eye glare that she bumped into a man as he hurried around the corner of the department store.

“Oh!” She clasped her hands as she stepped to the side. “I’m terribly sorry.”

I didn’t realize that I slowed my pace to stare at the stranger until Quentin huffed impatiently. Something about this man triggered a silent alarm in my head, like when I walked past the alligators at the zoo and felt their hungry eyes upon me; only this time there was no protective glass.

The stranger frowned. He was a little man with tanned skin and dirty brown hair that hung loosely over his face. His long pointy nose and bucked teeth reminded me of a weasel. He mumbled something I couldn’t hear from where I stood.

The elderly man straightened and the woman took a step backward.

“Come on, Ri-Ri.” Quentin tugged my arm.

Weasel screamed, “I said give me your purse!”

Fear tore the breath from my throat in a gasp and Quentin went rigid at my side, his fingers digging deep into my arm.

With a shaking hand, the woman tried to slip her purse off her shoulder, but Weasel snatched it before she was through. The white strap tightened around her wrist and she was jerked forward.

We watched, not daring to breathe, as she fell to the ground.

Cursing, Weasel tugged on the purse again, and this time the thin leather strap broke, freeing the old woman. Weasel tucked his prize under his arm and ran down the sidewalk in our direction.

I could feel my arm bruising under Quentin’s iron grip as we stood paralyzed. I begged my legs to move, my lungs to breathe, but my body wouldn’t listen.

Weasel drew closer.

Realizing that our chance to run had passed, I hugged the toaster against my body and closed my eyes. The soft thud of the mugger's footsteps tied themselves to the beating of my heart until they were a single pulse that locked my jaw tighter with each beat. Quentin pulled me against him so close it seemed I could smell his fear, a bitter scent that lay just below his Polo cologne.

The footsteps were in front of us, yet there was no pause in his stride. Would he run right past us? Or was he going to attack us, too?

Curled around each other, we waited to find out.

A second passed.

Followed by another.

When nothing happened, I cracked open an eye and found Weasel lying on the sidewalk next to me, his face a combination of bewilderment and fury. The purse he had stolen lay neatly on top of the toaster box in my arms. Before I could move, he scrambled to his feet and ran empty-handed out into the parking lot.

I remained frozen, too confused to move. What had happened in the few seconds while I had my eyes closed?

“Ri-Ri?”

I turned to Quentin, who now stood a good two feet away from me. The blood had drained from his face, leaving his skin the same color as his bleached hair. His mouth flapped with questions that wouldn't form. He looked like a possessed nutcracker.

I heard a soft shuffle behind me and turned away from my best friend to find the elderly man helping the woman up off the sidewalk. As she brushed gravel from her sweater, I noticed that her wrist was purple and swollen.

I plucked the purse from the top of the toaster box and walked over to the couple on shaky legs. I held the purse out to her. “Here.” My voice was barely a whisper.

The woman's eyes welled with tears as she grabbed on to the broken strap. “Oh, dear.” She pressed her lips into a thin line. “Please don't think that I'm not grateful, but that was a foolish thing for you to do. What were you thinking, going after a man like that?”

I shook my head. “What are you talking about?”

The man put an aged hand on my shoulder. “Maybe ‘going after’ isn't the right

way to phrase it. But we saw you trip him. I know you were just trying to help, but you could have been hurt.”

That wasn’t possible. I remembered standing perfectly still with my eyes closed. I couldn’t have tripped the mugger without knowing I did. I shook my head harder. “No, you’re wrong. The mugger must have tripped and somehow I caught your purse.” My mind raced to make sense of it. “Maybe because it’s not very well lit here, you got confused.” I looked to Quentin for support.

He shrugged a shoulder. “Maybe ... ”

“Now wait just a minute.” The old man held his hands up in surrender. “We’re not trying to upset you, honey. We’re just worried, that’s all. We need to report this, so why don’t you two wait with us until we can get the police out here.”

“Wait? In the dark, empty parking lot?” I laughed, a high-pitched, nervous sound. “I’m sorry, but there’s no way I’m just going to stand here and wait for that guy to come back.” Even as I spoke, the shadows around me seemed to grow bigger and darker. I shivered, and it felt like my skin wanted to slide itself free from my body. “Besides ... I—I don’t feel right.”

“Are you hurt?” Quentin asked.

“No.” But I wasn’t okay, either. I tried to find the words to tell him what was wrong, but I didn’t know how to explain. A strange feeling pressed against me—like static in the air before a thunderstorm. It was a familiar feeling, almost *déjà vu*. I tried to place it, but the more I reached, the faster it sank into the recess of my mind.

Swallowing took more effort than it should have. “Q, I’m out.” I shot him a questioning glance as I began my backward retreat. “You with me?”

The old man said, “I don’t think you should go anywhere just yet.”

I refused to look at him. “Q?”

Quentin glanced from me to the old couple and back to me. He huffed. “Let’s go.”

Without waiting for him to catch up, I turned and ran as fast as I could, which wasn’t that fast considering the jeans I wore were meant to show the curves of my legs, not allow them to bend. By the time I rounded the second corner of the mall, my arms burned from carrying the toaster, but I spotted my blue Ford Fiesta. Relief deflated the tension that had ballooned inside of me. I’d never

thought I'd see the day when I couldn't get away from the mall fast enough.

When I reached my car, Quentin skidded to a panting halt at my side. "If the toaster relay was an Olympic sport, you'd get the gold."

I ignored him as I sorted the keys in my hand, looking for the one that would open the door.

"Ri-Ri?" Concern wrapped around his words, making them thick like syrup. "Maybe we should hold off on the party. It couldn't hurt to talk to the police."

Was he crazy? "Actually it would hurt quite a bit if that guy came back and murdered us while we waited."

Quentin opened his mouth to reply, but was interrupted by a soft chuckling.

"What's this—you're talking about me?"

We wheeled around in the direction of the voice. From the side of a rusted conversion van, out stepped Weasel.

2

No one ever said that life was fair.

Maybe if I'd had more time, I could have figured myself out. But now, with my potential death a parking spot away, I realized I was nothing more than a jagged puzzle piece in a world of smooth edges. I had no place, no purpose. If Quentin died, his death would be a tragedy. I knew he'd make a great therapist someday, and the world would suffer from the loss. But me ... I tried to think how my death would affect anything and came up blank. My list of aspirations ended just past getting more air on the ramps at the skate park and graduating high school.

Weasel took a step forward. I dropped the toaster and thought my heart might join the box on the warm asphalt. Blood rushed through my head, beating against my temples and drawing beads of sweat onto my forehead. I licked my dry lips.

"Raleigh, get behind me." Quentin pushed me roughly against my car and stepped in front of me. He stared at Weasel. "Listen up, you can have my wallet." He pulled it out of his back pocket, unclipped the chain, and threw it on the ground at Weasel's feet. "Now get the hell out of here."

Weasel folded his arms as a smirk spread across his face. "Whaddya know, the queer's got balls."

Quentin stiffened, but said nothing.

I peeked around his shoulder. "You got his wallet, now go away. Go away, or I'll ..." I cringed inwardly as I left the unfinished sentence floating in the air. Or I'll what? Throw a gigantic toaster at you? The man in front of me was not a piece of bread.

Weasel chuckled again and walked toward us.

“Don’t come any closer,” Quentin said, his voice wavering.

“Like this?” Weasel kept walking until he was directly in front of Quentin.

Quentin took a step back with his arms held wide, plastering me against the driver’s side window. “What do you want?”

“Payback.” Weasel balled a fist into Quentin’s shirt collar and yanked him forward.

Quentin thrust out his arm and wedged it against Weasel’s chest—but it didn’t pry him far enough apart. Weasel’s other arm reached back, his fist quivering in the air for just a second before striking out and connecting with Quentin’s temple. Quentin spun like a drunken ballerina in an awkward circle before he crumpled to the ground.

I finished a scream I hadn’t realized I began and dropped to help my unmoving friend.

“Shut up!” Weasel grabbed me by the back of my tank top and threw me against my car. The fiberglass popped inward from my hip and I tumbled to the ground in a heap.

Weasel smiled, exposing long, gray teeth. “She’s alone,” he called over his shoulder.

Two men emerged from behind the same van and joined Weasel. They looked alike—their skin was the same caramel color and their hair the same ash brown. Their eyes hung back in their skulls, casting dark shadows underneath. They had to be brothers. The younger one, who looked my age, seemed afraid.

My hair fluttered from a breeze that swirled around me. It seemed to rise from the very spot where I sat. I shivered as I inched my way back to my feet, using my fingers against the car door to guide me.

A very tiny voice in my head, one that I didn’t even know existed, spoke up for the first time: *The young one will go down with the least resistance.* It was barely a whisper, like a mother hushing a crying baby. The words brushed across my mind like icy fingertips and raised the hair on the back of my neck.

Fantastic. As if the night weren’t bad enough, now I was hearing voices inside my head. The car keys that I’d managed to hang on to until this moment slipped from my hand and fell on top of the toaster. The soft pretzel rolling in my stomach felt like it would soon join them.

The older thug—possibly in his late twenties—snarled at me. His features were harder than his brother's, with scowl lines etched deep into his skin. "Stupid kid," he said. "Whaddya think? You're gonna stop a snatch and save the day?" He took another angry step toward me. "I think you're going to pay for not minding your own business."

My legs trembled and I tried to work up another scream, but my voice caught in my throat like a knotted balloon.

"Now wait just a minute," Weasel said, stepping in front of him. "There are plenty of ways to teach her a lesson, and I'm more interested in the ways that are fun for us."

Younger brother's eyes bulged while his older brother smiled.

A whimper escaped my throat. I sucked my bottom lip into my mouth to keep the flood of other pathetic sounds from falling out. I was dangerously close to spilling the warm tears collecting in my eyes when the breeze returned, lifting my hair and swirling through my fingers. *For that last remark, we hurt Weasel first.*

What? Hurt Weasel? That didn't make any sense. But then again, it was a voice in my head that said it, so why should it make sense? I rubbed two fingers against my temple.

"Um, guys ... "

I looked up, surprised to find it was the younger brother who had spoken.

"I think we should go. Somebody might show up and ... I think there's something wrong with her." He whispered the last part, as if worried it might upset me.

"Nah." Weasel pushed the younger brother back. "We're not going anywhere."

His smile made my skin crawl. I couldn't decide which I wanted to do more—pass out or throw up.

Weasel cocked his head to the side. "Don't you worry, baby doll. You just might like it."

This couldn't be happening. Surely there was a security guard patrolling the lot nearby who could put a stop to this. I took a deep breath, ready for the scream I'd been waiting for to finally come out.

But instead, I opened my mouth and said, "You're right. I am going to like

this.” My eyes flew wide and I took a step back. I hadn’t meant to say anything. I sucked in another breath and tried screaming again; only, like before, words replaced my cry. “It’s been a long time, and I’ve been itching for a good fight.” Wide-eyed, I clamped both hands over my mouth before I could say more.

Weasel’s mouth dropped open.

“See,” the younger brother whispered. “I told you something’s wrong with her.”

“She’s screwing with us,” the older brother said, but his eyes danced nervously between me and Weasel. “She thinks she’s a badass.”

Me? Badass? That word and I didn’t even exist on the same planet. Skateboarding aside, I was obsessed with strawberry lip gloss and adding to my stuffed animal collection, and my idea of manual labor was washing the dishes by hand when the dishwasher was broken. Badass ... I would have found it funny if I wasn’t so terrified.

Weasel snorted. “You think you’re a badass?”

I wanted to shake my head, but my neck refused to cooperate. I could only stare back.

“Sure she does,” the older brother said with a frown. “Look at her just staring at us like that.”

Weasel spit on the ground next to my shoe, which I’m sure had been his target. “So Little-Miss-Barbie-Badass, you’re itching for a fight, and I’m itching for something else. Let’s see if we can help each other out.” He moved toward me.

My stomach lurched and I felt sure that throwing up had won the battle over passing out. He was almost upon me, mere inches separating his cigarette-stained fingers from my bare arm, when it happened.

A tight pressure squeezed the inside of my chest, like firm hands holding a struggling rabbit. It enveloped my heart and forced it to return to its regular beat. Next, like silk sliding beneath my skin, I felt myself being tried on like a suit. I stretched my arms, flexed my fingers, and rocked back on my heels, only it wasn’t me doing those things.

I braced myself for the wave of terror that was sure to wash over me, but it never came. Instead, a smile that didn’t belong to me pulled at my lips.

“Rich!” the younger brother warned, but it was too late.

I dodged to the side, just beyond the reach of Rich's grasping hand. As he moved past me, I hooked my right arm around his outstretched limb, pulling it behind his back and bending him over. Before I could stop myself I struck his extended elbow with my left hand, shattering the bone.

He screamed and dropped to the ground, landing on the toaster. He rolled off the crumpled box, cursing me as he cradled his forearm that dangled in unnatural angles.

Oh, gross. From far away, I felt the stirrings of nausea, but just as quickly a warm pressure wrapped around my stomach and the feeling left. I couldn't be certain, but I was pretty sure I was still smiling.

The older brother, his face drained of color, jumped back from the groaning man. He looked up at me with red veins webbed across his protruding eyes. "You're gonna die!" he screamed. Flecks of spit foamed at the corners of his mouth. He reached in his back pocket and pulled out a large switchblade, releasing the blade from the hilt with a click. From deep within the cotton comfort of my brain, I thought I should be concerned about this latest development, but my possessed body didn't flinch.

I saw one of my eyes—large, blue, and serene—reflected in the blade as it fell toward my face. I wondered if everyone felt so at peace right before they died. I closed my eyes and waited for ... I wasn't sure exactly. I hoped it wouldn't hurt.

"Donnie, don't!" the younger brother cried.

I braced myself for the bite of metal, but it never came. Instead, a small wind brushed along my cheek, and I opened my eyes in time to see Donnie's blade miss my face by inches. "You're going to have to be faster than that," I heard my voice taunt.

Donnie cried out, his pulse pounding in his temples. His second strike was a wide-open arc that I ducked with time to spare. "Faster still," my voice teased. I felt my smile grow wider.

Donnie screamed again and charged at me with three rapid stabs.

I ducked to the left. "You missed." And again to the right. "Missed again." The third swing went wide and I spun behind his outreached arm, turned back, and kicked.

I heard a sound like a twig being snapped in two and saw Donnie's blade fly

through the air. He was too busy holding his hand to his chest and screaming to notice. More broken bones, and still I felt nothing. For someone who couldn't watch a scary movie without throwing a pillow over her face, I thought I should feel something—horror, fear, disgust—*anything*. My smile twitched.

Careful, the voice whispered inside my head, *the battlefield is no place to lose focus*.

Since when is the mall parking lot a battlefield?

The battlefield is the ground under your enemy's feet, the voice answered.

“Donnie, let's just go,” the younger brother pleaded. “She's not worth it.”

Donnie snorted in agreement, but his eyes never left my face. The fingers of his good hand slowly curled into a fist.

“Don't.” The younger brother's voice cracked.

Donnie nodded his head dismissively at his brother and lunged forward.

The silk that enveloped my body lengthened until it brushed from my fingers to my toes. Time seemed to move in slow motion as I spun to the side of Donnie's fist. I turned to face the back of his body.

Donnie stumbled back around. I dropped to the ground and swept my leg around and through his. He looked confused in the instant when his feet were off the ground, right before his head made a sickening crack against the pavement.

I turned back to face the younger brother, casually flipping my hair over my shoulder as I did. The smile was still in place, but I could taste the beginnings of bile on the back of my tongue.

The younger brother pulled out his own knife, but he didn't handle it nearly as well as his brother. His hand trembled, making the weapon look more like a flopping fish than an instrument of death. “Please,” he whispered.

My body stepped forward.

The blood drained from his face, leaving his skin the color of ash. He stepped back. “I don't want to fight you.”

“And I didn't want to fight you three,” I replied, and this time the words were my own. “I *wanted* to go to a party tonight and *finally* hook up with this boy I like. It was the end-of-the-school-year party; the entire junior class was invited. It was pretty much my last chance to see this guy until fall.” I balled my hands into fists. “Guess we're both out of luck tonight.” My nails dug into my palm,

sending twinges of pain up my arm. It was wonderful to feel again.

The little brother took another step back. “But it wasn’t my idea,” he said. “Rich was mad because you messed up his snatch-and-grab. He said he wanted to scare you.”

The smile fell from my face. “How would you like *me* to scare *you*?” I took another step closer.

He took two steps back. “You already do,” he whispered.

“Good.” I stomped at the ground in front of me, and the younger brother dropped his knife and jumped so high I thought for a moment he might pop out of his skin. He twisted in midair and started running in the opposite direction the moment his feet hit the ground.

I turned to check on Quentin, but the voice in my head stopped me. *We must not let our enemy escape*, the voice whispered. *He can’t be allowed to harm again*.

I sighed. What was I supposed to do? I was a little over five feet and he had a head start. There was no way I could catch up.

We don’t have to, the voice answered. I felt the silk stretch out and brush the inside of my fingertips. Before I knew it, I was bent over and picking up the younger brother’s discarded knife. My thumb closed the blade into the metal hilt. My right leg stepped back and my arm rose over my head. I shut my eyes, threw, and didn’t open them until after I heard the thud. When I did, the younger brother lay unconscious four parking rows over.

It was done. I should have felt relieved, but the ropes of anxiety twisted tighter around my chest until I thought my ribs would break from the pressure. Now that I was done with the outward threat, the battle had moved inside of me. My muscles strained against the unnatural presence, my breath locked inside my lungs until, inch by painful inch, the warm silk beneath my skin unraveled, leaving my blood cold in its wake. Despite the warm night air, I began to shiver, the trembling growing more violent with each second until I was sure I was having a seizure.

“Raleigh?”

From far away I heard Quentin talking to me, but I couldn’t respond. My throat convulsed, and as much as I gasped, I couldn’t suck enough air down. I

didn't even realize I was on the ground until I saw Quentin leaning over me.

Darkness seeped along the edge of my vision, and I gave in to the weight pulling at my consciousness. I heard the wail of emergency vehicles, but drifted away even as their red and blue lights tumbled and twirled against the black behind my eyelids. I hung there, clinging to the place that teetered between awake and unconscious, before landing somewhere with no colors and sirens, only the comfort of thick, dark silence.

3

Japan, 1493

Senshi jolted upright from her sleeping mat, her startled gasp rousing the man next to her.

Yoshido, accustomed to her premonitions, awoke in an instant and grasped beside him for his sword. “How long do we have?”

“The enemy is almost here,” she replied.

He cursed softly as he tied his long black hair into a knot on top of his head. When he finished, he asked, “Are you ready?”

She nodded, biting the insides of her cheeks so her emotions wouldn’t betray her. Yoshido had once commented on her inability to smile. He didn’t know that it was because she was always biting, trying to swallow the dangerous fear that continued to break her guarded surface.

And there was reason to fear with Japan currently at war with itself. Every land-hungry Shogun was sending his armies to take over the villages of peaceful rulers like Senshi and Yoshido’s Lord Toyotomi. As a samurai, Senshi had sworn an oath of blood that she would not let that happen, even if the cost meant her life.

Yoshido stood in the doorway and peered out into the night, the moonlight casting harsh shadows against his angled face. Despite the calm silence, the threat of violence thickened the air like fog. “We should separate. I will go find Zeami, and together we will protect Lord Toyotomi. I need you to go warn the other samurai.”

“Of course,” Senshi answered. Zeami and Yoshido had trained together since boyhood. Together they were an unstoppable force.

“Good. I urge you to locate the twins first. I worry about tonight; I feel a great

evil lurking about.”

Senshi understood. The twins were the youngest and had the least battle experience. Yoshido was the leader of their samurai army, and she knew he felt great responsibility for his soldiers.

Senshi moved past him to grab her own sword, but he snatched her by the wrist and pulled her roughly against him. “Senshi, I—”

“No, Yoshido,” she interrupted him, pressing her cheek against his chest. Why must he do this before every battle? He would tell her how much he loved her, and how he always would. He would tell her his love would never die, even if this was the battle that ended his life, an outcome she could not fathom.

She placed a finger against his lips. “We have no time for talk. Tonight we fight, just like any other night. And then later, when our lord is safe and our village secure, we will return to each other and all will be well.”

Smiling, he gently tilted her chin up toward him and kissed her parted lips. “All will be well,” he repeated.

She nodded, reluctant to let him go. He gently pushed her back, giving her one last smile before turning for the door.

Senshi bit down on her cheeks. She knew she had precious minutes left to warn the other samurai, but for the first time, she hesitated. She found herself rooted in place watching Yoshido run, and when the night swallowed the last of him, her heart broke, and she could barely breathe under the weight of despair.

She knew then that she just kissed the man she loved for the last time.

4

How are we feeling, Rileigh?" A stranger's voice cut through my dream, shattering it like the pieces of a mosaic.

"No!" I opened my eyes and reached for the fleeting image, my heart already aching with a loss I didn't understand. Instead of seeing the black-haired Japanese warrior, I was blinded by a bright light at a very close range.

Jerking back, a man in green scrubs clicked off a pen light and stuffed it into his shirt pocket. "Sorry about that. I should have given you a chance to get adjusted."

I tried to grumble in agreement, but my throat was so dry I could only manage a cough. Once the annoying spots left my field of vision, I tried to figure out where I was. Dusty blinds had been slanted enough to allow thin purple strips of predawn sky to decorate the plain white walls and hospital equipment that lay asleep in the corner.

But that couldn't be right. The last thing I remembered was leaving Macy's with Quentin and the toaster. After that ... I wasn't sure.

"You are a very lucky young lady."

I glared at the man leaning over me. He was in his thirties, with brown, curly hair cut short. He looked more like the lead singer in a boy band than a doctor.

"Three men," he continued. "That's quite a feat."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, struggling to form words around the grit in my throat.

Before he could answer, a red-haired nurse with bangs curled so high they defied gravity skidded to a halt just inside my room. Her eyes widened and she smiled. "Dr. Wendell, I didn't know you worked the pediatric wing."

He cleared his throat. "Normally I don't, but I took a special interest in this

case.” When she didn’t move, he narrowed his eyes. “Will there be anything else?”

She took a step back. “No, I, uh ... ” She looked at me. “I’ll check back with you later, sweetie.” She turned on her heels and strode from the room.

“Now,” Dr. Wendell raised a single eyebrow, “am I to understand you are suffering from memory loss?”

I tried to shrug, but it hurt to move my shoulders. “I remember buying a toaster.”

“Which I’m afraid didn’t fare as well as you.”

I followed his gaze to a gray vinyl chair positioned next to my bed and gasped when I took in the torn box taking up most of the seat. Through the hole I could see my own frightened eyes multiplied by the dent gouged into the chrome.

I curled my fingers around the plastic bedrail to quiet the tremors that shook my body. Images came back to me: Weasel’s twisted grin, a knife flashing under the parking lot lights, and the bodies of my attackers hitting the ground. “No. It’s impossible.” I shook my head, hoping to mute the sound of breaking bones that played on a continuous loop inside my throbbing head.

“Raleigh?” Dr. Wendell leaned in closer and peered into my eyes. “Are you all right?”

My mind raced to make sense of it. There was no way I could have fought off three men by myself. I probed my scalp, my fingers searching for a bump or any sign that I’d hit my head. I couldn’t find anything.

“Raleigh?”

I snapped my head up and gave him a seething look. “Of course I’m not okay! Three men tried to kill me last night!” And that’s when it hit me—I wasn’t the only one attacked. The image of Quentin’s face-pirouette seemed to appear from behind a velvet curtain inside my mind. I curled my fingers into my bedsheet as I relived the moment. “Oh my God. Q!” I threw the blanket off of me, but Dr. Wendell placed a hand against my shoulder before I could swing my legs off the mattress. I tried to shake him off. “I have to find him!”

“Your friend is fine—just a little bump on the head.” He released my shoulder and patted my hand once, but I snatched it away before he could do it again. “Easy.” He took a step back and held his hands in the air. “I’m only trying to

help.”

I sat back against the pillow. Whether it was intuition, or a side effect from the attack, I was suddenly very aware of the fact that I was in a strange room, alone, with a man who had a “special interest” in my case. Whatever that meant. “You can help by not touching me.”

He frowned. “Well, that’s going to make an exam difficult.” When I didn’t answer, he shrugged and reached for my chart. “Okay then. Other than being a little disorientated, how do you feel physically?”

“Are you kidding me with this? You went to med school, right? I was attacked, I’m in the hospital—can’t you draw your own conclusions?”

Dr. Wendell coughed into his hand in a failed effort to hide an amused smile. “Sure, I could draw my own conclusions, but that’s how malpractice suits are started. I like not getting sued, Raleigh.” He moved the toaster from the chair to the floor and sat down. “You don’t have to answer my questions now. I can sit here and wait until you’re feeling more communicative.” He reached for the TV remote clipped to my bed and flipped through several channels. “Look here, Springer.”

I ground my teeth together as the title sequence played. I leaned over, ripped the remote from his hand, and turned the TV off just as a toothless man wandered onstage to discuss his secret farm romance. As if I wasn’t traumatized enough. “You win.” I sighed. “There was this time in junior high when Q’s mom made JELL-O shots for her Pampered Chef party and we ate ten before we realized they had alcohol in them. I feel like I did the morning after that happened.”

“Mm-hmm,” he murmured as he jotted notes down. “That’s perfectly normal.”

I glared at him as he stood and returned the chart to the foot of my bed. “Normal for who?” I paused to cough. “Reality-show skanks?”

He tucked his pen into his shirt pocket. “The after-effects of shock can feel like a bad hangover. I imagine you’re experiencing a headache? Maybe some nausea?”

I pulled the blanket up and closed my eyes. He wasn’t kidding. The throbbing in my temples was so powerful, I would swear at any moment the force would push my eyeballs from my skull.

“Can I at least check your pulse?”

I cracked my eyes. “If you make it quick.”

He placed two tan fingers on my wrist and counted the beats of my pulse under his breath. “Your vitals are great.”

“Then why are you still touching me?”

He let go with a chuckle.

From the hallway I could hear a rapid clacking of high heels as if someone were trying to attempt Morse code via Prada. I groaned. It had to be Debbie. She was the only woman I knew who ran as if her legs were plastic-wrapped together from her thighs to her ankles.

Debbie burst into the room and I tried to sink deeper into the bed to avoid the whirlwind of Oscar de la Renta clothing and Chanel perfume that made up my mother. She pulled her phone several inches away from her face and said, “My poor baby, you look like hell. I’m going to take care of this. I’m going to hire the best lawyer and—” She flinched and brought the phone back to her ear. “No, no, Marcy. I wasn’t talking to you. How would I know what you look like right now?” With a groan she plugged her free ear with her finger and twisted away from me and the slack-mouthed doctor. “It’s swimsuit season. If you’re that hungry, go suck on a Tic Tac!”

“That’s your mother?” Dr. Wendell whispered.

“Debbie Martin; agent extraordinaire,” I answered, pinching the bridge of my nose between two fingers.

“Good to know.” The doctor, with his eyes never leaving my mother, straightened his scrubs. “Raleigh, would you like me to send in the nurse with something to relieve the pain?”

“Oh, do you have a cure for mothers?”

“I’m sorry?” Dr. Wendell asked.

“I *said*, ‘That’d be great.’” I flashed an innocent smile. “I had a headache, but all of a sudden it’s so much worse.”

Debbie closed her phone with a snap and turned back toward me, wrapping perfectly manicured fingers around my bedrail. From this close, I could see the dark circles around her eyes that concealer failed to hide. “Raleigh, baby.” She sighed and her body deflated like a busted water bra. “I want you to know I

came as soon as I could. I grabbed the first flight out of LAX.”

“It’s cool, Mom. You’re busy. I get that.” And I did. Debbie had done some modeling in her youth, making the transition from print ads to runways at sixteen. But like Debbie always said, fame is fleeting. At seventeen, she found herself preggo with yours truly. With her career over she could have faded into obscurity. Instead, she returned home, finished her degree, and started her own talent agency. She barely scraped a living until she discovered a four-year-old-girl in a McDonalds PlayPlace who went on to become the hottest child actor in Hollywood. I haven’t seen my mother for more than a couple of days at a time since.

Debbie opened her mouth, but the words died on her tongue as she turned to Dr. Wendell. “How is my little girl, doctor ... ?”

He smiled. “It’s Wendell. And your daughter is doing exceptionally well. But, as you can imagine, she’s going to need plenty of rest.” After a pause, he continued, “In fact, rather than disturb Rileigh further, why don’t we continue this conversation in the hall?”

Debbie’s acrylic nails clicked softly as they slid away from the rail. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea. I just got here. I’m sure Rileigh needs her mother right now—”

“Trust me.” Dr. Wendell gave a reassuring nod. “Rileigh needs her rest.”

If I didn’t know better, I’d swear Dr. Wendell winked at me, like he was doing me a favor or something. It didn’t earn him any points. I didn’t want or need his help.

Debbie frowned, never taking her eyes off my face. “Will you be okay by yourself?”

It was a ridiculous question. Before Nana got sick and died the previous year, she stayed at the house with me when Debbie went out of town. But now, every couple of days it was me alone with a drawer full of takeout menus. “I’ll be fine.”

Debbie nodded, though she didn’t look convinced.

“You must be exhausted, Mrs. Martin,” Dr. Wendell said. “If you like I can show you where you can grab a cup of coffee.”

“It’s Ms.,” Debbie answered automatically.

I thought I saw the trace of a smile on the doctor's lips. "My apologies, Ms. Martin." He held his arm out and gestured for the door. "After you."

Debbie hesitated, studying my face. I closed my eyes, faking exhaustion, until I heard the shuffle of rubber soles move past my bed, followed by the snaps of Debbie's heels.

It wasn't more than five minutes until someone rapped lightly on the door frame. I opened my eyes to discover the red-haired nurse standing in the doorway. "Are you feeling up to a visitor?"

"Do you know who?" I pulled my hair over my shoulder and combed my fingers through the knots.

The nurse shook her head. "He says he's a friend."

Quentin! I smiled and nodded, sending the nurse away. Despite what I'd told Debbie, I wasn't ready to be alone. Without someone to distract me I would be forced to face the memories of last night. It didn't make sense. I should be dead.

My fingers trembled as I pulled apart a tangle of hair. The longer I sat alone in bed, the harder the shadows of last night's memories pressed against me with needle-like claws. The snap of a bone. An agonized cry. A voice of calm detachment directing my next move.

"No." I pressed my palms against my temples, begging the images from last night to stop playing like a horror movie marathon inside my head. I heard the pad of swift footsteps down the hall. Relief drowned the scream that threatened to rip from my throat.

But the relief was short lived. The stranger that strode into my hospital room was definitely not a friend.

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