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MORE THAN WE CAN TELL

Written by Brigid Kemmerer

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BRIGID KEMMERER

MORE THAN WE CAN TELL

LOOKING FOR ANSWERS THEY FOUND EACH OTHER

BLOOMSBURY

MORE THAN WE CAN TELL

BRIGID KEMMERER

BLOOMSBURY
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

ONE

Emma

OtherLANDS Player Dashboard

USER NAME: Emma Blue (PRIVATE)

USER LEVEL: Admin/Developer

PLAYER NAME: Azure M

NEW MESSAGE

Thursday, March 15 5:26 p.m.

From: N1ghtmare

To: Azure M

You suck.

And that's what I'm going to say when I find you and shove it in your mouth hole.

Gross. At least this guy didn't include a dick pic.

My finger hovers over the Ban Player button.

I should do it. I know I should.

Nightmare is pissed because I booted him from a team for harassing another player. It was right at the end of the mission, and me booting him meant he lost any XP he'd earned. Two hours of gaming, down the drain.

But OtherLANDS doesn't have the biggest fan base. Maybe two hundred players on a good day. I only created the game as part of a school project. I uploaded a link on the county school's 5Core forum because I needed a few players to test it. I never thought anyone would actually *play*.

But they did. And now . . . I *do* have players. I've created a community. And one idiot trolling me on 5Core could be enough to chase the rest of them away.

I can see his post now.

Azure M got mad about a little trash talk and she banned me. This is why girls are ruining gaming.

Because trust me, it's a *him*. Find me a female who'd say "shove it in your mouth hole."

I sigh and delete his message.

Then I click over to iMessage and send a text to Cait Cameron.

Emma: Some guy just sent me a message that he's going to "shove it in my mouth hole."

Cait: Mouth hole? Isn't that kind of redundant?

Emma: Right?

Cait: Some days I'm so glad that the worst I get are people telling me I'm ugly.

Cait does makeup tutorials on YouTube.

She's not ugly. Not even close.

But her makeup gets a little out there. She's into cosplay and character re-creations, and my geekery doesn't extend quite that far. Her real talent lies in the designs she creates herself. The other day she showed up at school with tiny glittered mermaid scales across her cheeks. Once she made her face look like she was unzipping her skin, but a teacher made her wash it off.

I'm not big on makeup, but I let her do mine last month after she begged and pleaded and told me she'd thought of something perfect. She put this translucent circuitry along my temples and down my jaw, very faint, then lined my eyes with dark liner and silver shadow. I thought it looked pretty cool—until the douchebags at school started asking me if I was programmed for pleasure.

I washed it off in the bathroom midway through first period.

Cait hasn't mentioned it. I haven't either.

I send another message.

Emma: I'm about to get online. Want to play?

Cait: I can't. I just set up to try a new winged eyeliner look on my mom.

Ugh. Of course she is.

The instant I have the thought I feel like a real bitch. Cait and I used to be connected at the hip, but somewhere around the beginning of the school year, we began to drift apart. I don't know if it's the gaming or the makeup or what, but more and more, it seems like one of us is always doing something *else*.

I wish I knew how to fix it. But if the solution is fish scales and translucent circuitry, it's not happening.

I sigh and switch back to OtherLANDS and log in as a player instead of an admin.

Immediately, I get a team request from Ethan_717.

I smile and slide my gaming headset over my ears. Maybe the afternoon isn't going to be *total* crap.

I have no idea who Ethan is in real life. He's in high school, because his 5Core profile says he goes to Old Mill, but that doesn't exactly thin the crowd. Ethan could be a fake name, but Ethan_717 isn't really a "character" name, so it might be real. In-game, he's built like a warrior, clad in black armor and a red cape. A mask covers the lower half of his face, and he carries two electrified swords. Blue electricity sizzles along the steel when he draws them in battle—some of my best design work.

He barely knows anything about me, though he's one of the few people I've told that I created OtherLANDS. To everyone else in-game and on 5Core, I'm just Azure M, another random gamer. And no one on here can connect Azure M to Emma Blue.

Once we're teamed together, we can speak through the headsets.

"Hey, M," Ethan says. His avatar waves.

"Hey, E." I smile wider. He's got a nice voice. A little lower than you'd expect, with the tiniest rasp. It's kind of sexy.

Okay, yes, I might have a little crush on Ethan. Animated bluebirds aren't circling my head or anything, but still.

Which is ridiculous. Old Mill is forty-five minutes away from here. I have no idea what he really looks like. He could be a freshman, for god's sake.

"I was going to grab a few more people," he says. "Feel like running a mission?"

This is the other thing keeping the animated birds at bay: though he's funny and friendly, he only ever talks about the game.

Sigh.

"Sure," I say.

"I've been meaning to tell you; you've got a gap in the graphics in the elven woodlands. I'll send you a screenshot on FiveCore when we're done so you can fix it."

"Sweet. Thanks."

Like I said. Only gaming. Only tech.

Which is okay. I suppose I should be grateful that Ethan hasn't asked for my bra size.

After a moment, another player name appears in the team list. GundarWez. His avatar joins the team on the screen. He's huge and dressed entirely in black—which is a complete waste of all the customizations I spent so much time building in. I've never played with him before.

"Hi, Gundar," I say into my mic.

"Hey," says Ethan.

"Hi, Azure. Hi, Ethan."

I stifle a giggle. After the huge avatar, I expected a deep voice. Gundar sounds like he's nine.

Another player joins. The name appears on the team list, and the smile drops off my face.

N1ghtmare. Mr. Mouth Hole himself.

His avatar is female, because of course it is. Breasts as large as my coding will allow—which thankfully isn't too obscene. Tiny waist. Wide hips. He's customized the costume and skin color to be uniformly beige, so his avatar looks naked. It makes me want to remove the color from my coding.

I'm frozen in a mental space somewhere between disgust and irritation. This feels purposeful, but I can't figure out how. He wouldn't have known I was on the team until Ethan added him.

Maybe this will be okay. I know a lot of people will say things in a private message that they won't say over a microphone.

"Sorry," he says, and his voice is rough and gravelly. For half a second, I think he's actually *apologizing*, but then he says, "I thought this was a real team."

"It is," says Ethan. "We've got four. Want to run the mission through—"

"No. Not until you boot the bitch."

Apparently, some people will say things over a microphone that should never be said out loud. Disgust shifts into anger—and humiliation.

"Go ahead." My voice is even, though my heart gallops in my chest. "Boot yourself, Nightmare."

"No way. I'm here to play. I just don't want to play with some chick on the rag."

"Well, I don't want to play with a douchebag," I snap.

"Guys," says Ethan. He sighs. "There's a kid on this team."

"I'm not a kid!" says Gundar.

I wince. I forgot about him.

"Dude," says Nightmare. "Would you boot her? She can't game. She's going to drag the whole mission down."

"Dude," says Ethan, his tone full of dry mockery, "she built the game."

I wince. I try not to tell anyone that.

"Is that why it sucks so hard?"

"What is your problem?" I demand.

"You're my problem," says Nightmare. "Stupid whiny bitches who think they know how to game because they took a few coding classes, but really, they just *suck.* Now shut your mouth hole or I'll keep my promise to shove something in there—"

I slam my laptop shut. I yank the headset off. My heart pounds away. My eyes are suddenly hot.

It's nothing new. I shouldn't be upset.

I'm good at this. I built this game. I know what I'm doing.

You've got a gap in the graphics in the elven woodlands.

Okay, so it's not perfect. But I can *fix* it. What does that Nightmare guy have? A chip on his shoulder? An exhausted right hand?

Ugh. I can't believe I just thought that.

Nails scratch at my bedroom door. Before I can get up to

open it, Texas, my yellow Lab, shoves the door open with her muzzle. She's full of wags and a snuffling nose that keeps pressing at my hands.

It sounds adorable, but really this is her way of telling me she needs a walk.

Good. I need a distraction. I lock the computer, shove my phone in my pocket, and hurry down the stairs.

All the lights are on, but no one is around. Texas hops up and down on her front paws, looking eagerly at the back door.

I grab her collar and peer out into the darkness. Mom stands on the patio, a glass of wine in her hand. She's wearing dark jeans and a trim jacket, and her hair is in a ponytail bun. No makeup. She thinks it's a waste of time. She's a pediatric cardiologist, so you'd think she'd be oozing with empathy and compassion, but maybe she uses it all up at work. Around here, she's buttoned up and critical.

Compared to her, Dad looks like a stoner. He hasn't shaved in days, and he's wearing a zip-up sweatshirt and jeans. He's sprawled in one of the Adirondack chairs, a laptop balanced on his knees. A bottle of beer sits open on the pavement beside him.

Light from the fire pit reflects off both of them. I can't hear what they're saying, but considering their irritated expressions, I would bet money that Mom is lecturing him about *something*.

I catch the tail end of a sentence. ". . . don't like the influence it has on Emma."

Gaming. She's whining about gaming. As usual.

She spots me, and her face shifts to exasperation. "This is a private conversation," she calls.

These are the first words my mother has spoken to me all day.

I slide the door open a few inches. “The dog needs a walk.”

“Take her, then.” As if I wasn’t about to do that. She takes a sip of wine. “You need to get out of your room once in a while. Spend some time in the real world.”

That’s a dig at my father. He spends his life attached to a computer, living in otherworldly realms. He’s a game designer.

Apple, tree. Yeah, yeah, I get it.

You can imagine how much this pleases my doctor mother, who I’m sure envisioned me running Johns Hopkins by the time I turn twenty-five. She’d have no problem if I were holed up in my room with a biology textbook.

Dad sighs and runs a hand down his face. “Leave her alone, Catharine.”

“I would appreciate it if you would back me up on this, Tom.” A lethal pause. “Unless you’re too busy with your game.”

I slide the door closed. I don’t need to hear the rest of this argument. I could practically write the dialogue.

No one in this house would ever say “mouth hole,” but the vitriol is the same.

With a sigh, I grab the dog’s leash and turn for the front hall.

TWO

Rev

Happy birthday, son.

I hope you'll make me proud.

Robert.Ellis@speedmail.com

The note was in the mailbox. The envelope is addressed to me.

Not to me *now*. He'd never call me Rev Fletcher. He might not even know that's my name.

It's addressed to who I was ten years ago. There's no return address, but the postmark reads *Annapolis.*

I can't breathe. I feel exposed, like a sniper rifle is trained on me. I'm waiting for a bullet to hit me in the back of the head.

Ridiculous. I'm standing on the sidewalk in the middle of suburbia. It's March. A chill hangs in the air, the sun setting in

the distance. Two elementary-school-age girls are riding bikes in the street, singing a song and laughing.

My father doesn't need a bullet. This letter is enough.

He didn't need a bullet ten years ago, either.

Sometimes I wish he'd had a gun. A bullet would have been quick.

He knows my address. Is he here? Could he be here? The streetlights blink to life, and I sweep my eyes over the street again.

No one is here. Just me and those girls, who are riding lazy figure eights now.

When I was first taken away from my father, I couldn't sleep for months. I would lie in bed and wait for him to snatch me out of the darkness. For him to shake me or hit me or burn me and blame me. When I could sleep, I'd dream of it happening.

I feel like I'm having a nightmare right now. Or a panic attack. The rest of the mail is a crumpled mess in my hands.

I need this letter gone.

Before I know it, I'm in the backyard. Flame eats up a small pile of sticks and leaves in one of Mom's Pyrex bowls. Smoke curls into the air, carrying a rich, sweet smell that reminds me of fall. I hold the envelope over the bowl, and the tongue of fire stretches for it.

The paper feels like it's been folded and unfolded a hundred times, in thirds and then in half. The creases are so worn the paper might fall apart if I'm not careful. Like he wrote it ages ago, but he waited until now to mail it.

Happy birthday, Son.

I turned eighteen three weeks ago.

There's a familiar scent to the paper, some whiff of cologne or aftershave that pokes at old memories and buries a knife of tension right between my shoulder blades.

I hope you'll make me proud.

The words are familiar, too, like ten years doesn't separate me from the last time I heard him speak them out loud.

I want to thrust my entire hand into this bowl of fire.

Then I think of what my father used to do to me, and I realize thrusting my hand into a bowl of fire probably *would* make him proud.

My brain keeps flashing the e-mail address, like a malfunctioning neon sign.

Robert.Ellis@speedmail.com

Robert.

Ellis.

Robert Ellis.

The flame grabs hold. The paper begins to vanish and flake away.

A choked sound escapes my throat.

The paper is on the ground before I realize I've thrown it, and my foot stomps out the flame. Only the corner burned. The rest is intact.

I shove back the hood of my sweatshirt and run my hands through my hair. The strands catch and tangle on my shaking fingers. My chest aches. I'm breathing like I've run a mile.

I hope you'll make me proud.

I hate that there's a part of me that wants to. Needs to. I

haven't seen him in ten years, and one little note has me craving his approval.

"Rev?"

My heart nearly explodes. Luckily, I have razor-keen reflexes. I upend the bowl with one foot, stepping square over the letter with the other.

"What?"

The word comes out more of a warning than a question. I sound possessed.

Geoff Fletcher, my dad—not my father—stands at the back door, peering out at me. "What are you doing?"

"School project." I'm lying, obviously. I've been forced into a lie by one little letter.

He surveys me with obvious concern and steps out onto the porch. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Fine."

I don't sound fine, and he's not an idiot. He comes to the edge of the porch and looks down at me. He's wearing a salmon-pink polo shirt and crisply pressed khakis—his teaching clothes. He turned fifty last year, but you wouldn't know it to look at him. He stays in shape, and he's well over six feet. When I was seven, when a social worker first brought me here, I found him terrifying.

"Hey." His dark eyes are full of concern now. "What's going on?"

My thoughts are a tangled mess.

I should step off the letter, pick it up, and hand it to him. He could make it go away.

I think about my father. *I hope you'll make me proud.*

I'm almost shaking from the inner conflict. I don't want Geoff to know about it.

Geoff. Not *Dad*. My father already has a hold on me, and I've had this letter in my possession for fifteen minutes. Now that I've lied, I have to keep lying.

I do not like this feeling.

I can't look at Geoff. "I said I'm fine."

"You don't look fine."

"I'm fine." My voice is rough, almost a growl. "Okay?"

"Did something happen?"

"No." My fingernails dig into my palms, and my heart races like it needs to outrun something.

"Rev—"

I finally snap my head up. "Would you just *leave it*?"

He waits a beat, and my anger hangs in the air between us for the longest moment. "Why don't you come inside and talk to me?" His voice is low and mellow. Geoff is the master of chill. It makes him a good foster parent. It makes him a good dad. "It's getting late. I was going to start dinner so we can eat when Mom gets home."

"I'm going to Declan's."

I expect him to tell me no. I don't realize how badly I *want* him to tell me no until he says, "All right."

It's not a rejection, but somehow it feels like one. All of a sudden I want to beg for forgiveness. For the lying, for the anger, for doing something that protects my father.

But I can't. I pull up my hood and let hair fall across my face. My voice is penitent. "I'll clean this up first."

He's silent for a long moment, and I fish the bowl off the ground, scooping the burned pieces into it, keeping my foot over the letter. My movements are tight and jerky. I still can't look at him.

"Thanks," he says. "Not too late, okay?"

"Yeah." I fidget with the bowl and keep my eyes on the edge of it. A breeze teases at the hood of my sweatshirt, but it keeps me hidden. "I'm sorry."

He doesn't answer, and a nervous tension settles across my shoulders. I chance a glance up. He's not on the porch.

Then I hear the sliding glass door. He didn't even hear me. He's gone back inside, leaving me out here with the mess.

• • •

My best friend isn't home.

I've been waiting in the shadows like a criminal, sitting on the blacktop at the back corner of Declan's driveway. The chill in the air wasn't bad before, but it's soaked into my bones now, freezing me in place.

Light shines through his kitchen windows, and I can see his mother and stepfather moving around inside. They'd invite me in if they knew I was out here, but my brain is too heavy with panic and indecision. I fish out my phone to send him a text.

Rev: Are you working?

Dec: No. Movies with J. What's up?

"J" is Juliet, his girlfriend. I stare at my phone and focus on breathing. I hadn't realized how much I was counting on Declan being here until he *wasn't*.

I uncurl from the shadows and start walking. I can't go home, but I can't stay here unless I want to freeze to death. I should go to the gym, but they teach beginners on Thursdays, and if I rolled with someone tonight, they might not walk away from it.

I must be silent too long, because Declan sends another message.

Dec: Are you OK?

My fingers hesitate over the face of the phone. I'd been ready to tell him about the letter, but now . . . it doesn't feel right.

I force my fingers to work.

Rev: All OK. Have fun. Hi to J.

My phone rings almost immediately. It's him.

"What's going on?" he says in a rushed whisper. I wonder if he's actually calling me from inside the movie theater.

"It's nothing. I'm fine." My voice is rough and low.

He's quiet for a long moment. Declan knows every secret I have. It's not like me to be reticent.

"Do you need me to come home?" he says quietly.

His tone reminds me of Geoff. Like I need to be handled. Maybe I do, but I don't like the reminder.

I force my voice to be easy. I get halfway there. "Yeah, will you

pick me up a pint of chocolate ice cream, too? Dude. No. You're at a movie."

"Rev."

"It's nothing, Dec."

"Something happened."

"Nothing happened. I'll talk to you later, okay?" I push the button to end the call.

Something is definitely wrong with me.

My cell phone buzzes almost immediately.

Dec: What is up with you?

My father sent me a letter and I don't know what to do.

I can't write that. Even thinking it feels weak and immature. I have a purple belt in Brazilian jiu-jitsu, but I can't deal with three lines of chicken-scratch on a piece of paper that showed up in the mailbox.

Rev: It's nothing. I'm fine. Sorry to bother you.

He doesn't write back. Maybe he's pissed. Or maybe I am.

Good. I don't even know why that makes me happy.

I lift my phone again. I start a new e-mail. Add my father's e-mail address.

I type *Leave me alone* in the subject line.

I don't type a message.

I just press Send.

And then I walk, letting the darkness swallow me up.

THREE

Emma

The night air is crisp, just a hair too cold to be perfect. If we're lucky, spring is around the corner. Texas trots along beside me, tail gently wagging. We've been walking forever. I should be enjoying the peace and quiet and fresh air, but instead, I'm replaying the interaction with Nightmare.

I'll keep my promise to shove something in there.

She can't game.

You suck.

My eyes grow hot again, and I'm not ready for it. I give a hitching breath before I get it together.

My phone chimes with an e-mail. I loop the leash around one wrist and fish my phone out of my pocket.

It's a message via 5Core. From Ethan.

Thursday, March 15 6:46 p.m.
From: Ethan_717
To: Azure M

Hey, here's the screenshot I promised.

Also, that guy was an ass. I booted him. I'm really sorry.

Message me if you get back on.

The message chases away my tears. I smile.

I pull up the screenshot Ethan sent.

At first it takes a moment to see what I'm looking at, but when I figure it out, I giggle. His burly hero character is bisected by the slope of a mountain, and one sword-heavy arm is lifted in the generic /wave/ command. In the image, he looks like he's waving for help.

I've come to the corner by St. Patrick's Catholic Church, and there's a huge open stretch of grass in front of the parking lot. When I was a kid, we used to come to Mass here as a family, until one day Mom and Dad stopped bothering. It seems like an extra kick in the teeth that we let the dog crap on their lawn. I bring bags. Does that count?

The street is a well of silence, so I stop under the streetlight to let Texas off the leash to do her thing. While I'm waiting, I tap out a reply.

Emma: Thx. I'll fix it when I get back from walking the dog.

Around 9?

He must be online now, because his message comes back almost instantly.

Ethan: 9 is good. No d-bags this time.

I smile at the face of the phone. "Come on, Tex. We've got a date."

Texas doesn't come.

I lift my head. The field is empty.

I look around. The street is empty. A faint light glows from inside the church.

A breeze rushes through the trees, sliding under my jacket to make me shiver. The air smells like rain might not be far off.

I listen for Texy's dog tags to jingle. Nothing.

"Tex!" I call. "Texy! Come!"

How could I lose a nine-year-old dog in less than thirty seconds?

Get away from that technology.

Mom is going to kill me.

Then I hear it, the faint jingle of dog tags in the distance. She must have gone around the corner of the building. I break into a jog and spot her down by the back of the church, under the stained glass windows. It's nearly pitch-black out here, but she looks like she's eating something.

OMG. If she's found a dead animal, I am going to throw up.

"Texas!" I shout, sprinting in the darkness. "Tex. Get away from that!"

"She's okay," says a male voice. "I gave it to her."

I give a short scream and skid in the grass, coming down hard.

"I'm sorry," the guy says, and his voice is quiet. Now I see him, a dark huddled shape beside the church wall. He's wearing dark jeans and a hoodie, and the hood is large enough to put his entire face in darkness. I feel like I'm talking to a Sith lord.

"I'm sorry," he says again. "I didn't mean to scare you. I thought you saw me."

I scramble and somehow manage to find my feet. My phone went somewhere in the grass, and I have nothing with which to defend myself.

I can't believe I'm worried about my *phone*.

"Who are you?" I demand breathlessly. "What are you doing to my dog?"

"Nothing! They're chicken nuggets."

To the guy's credit, Texy looks thrilled. Her tail is wagging, and she looks up at me, chomping happily.

My pulse isn't ready to take him at his word. "So you're just randomly sitting beside a church eating chicken nuggets?"

"Yes. Well, the random sitting. Your dog is eating." His voice is dry and quiet. He hasn't moved.

I swallow my heartbeat. "Those aren't laced with rat poison or something, are they?"

"Of course not." He sounds offended.

"What are you doing here?"

"I like it here."

"A good place to bury a body?"

"What?"

"Nothing."

Texas finishes her nuggets and goes to him, nosing at his empty hands. Traitor dog. He rubs her behind her ears and she flops down next to him. Something is familiar about him, but I can't quite put my finger on it.

I lean in a bit. "Do I . . . do I know you?"

"I don't think so." The way he says it is almost self-deprecating. "But maybe. Do you go to Hamilton?"

"Yeah. You?"

"I'm a senior."

He's a year ahead of me. I study his shadowed form.

And then I have it. I don't know what his name is, but I know who *he* is. The hoodie should have been an immediate giveaway, because he's always wearing them. I've heard kids call him the Grim Reaper, but I'm not sure if he knows that. He doesn't have a dangerous reputation, just one of freakish interest. I don't really *know* him, but I'm *aware* of him, the way outcasts are always aware of each other.

I completely realign my immediate fear and start to think of other reasons a teenager might be sitting in the darkness.

"Are you okay?" I say.

He shakes his head. "No."

He says the word so simply, without much emotion, that it takes me a moment to process that he said *no*. His hands are buried in Texy's fur, and she's leaning into him.

I glance at my phone lying in the grass. "Do you want me to call someone?"

"I don't think so."

I sit down in the grass. It's cold and almost damp. "Did something happen to you?" I ask quietly.

He hesitates. "That's kind of a loaded question."

It is? "Are you sure you don't want me to call someone?"

"I'm sure."

We sit there in silence for a while. Texy rests her head in his lap, her neck under his arm. His hand remains buried in her fur, until she begins to look like a life preserver, and he's clinging for dear life.

Eventually, he looks up at me. I'm not sure how I can tell—the hood only moves a few inches. "Do you believe in God?"

My night could seriously not be more surreal. I wet my lips and answer honestly. "I don't know."

He doesn't challenge me, which I was worried about. "There's this verse I like," he says. " 'The one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.' "

My eyes narrow. "Are you quoting the Bible?"

"Yes." He says this like it's the most normal thing in the world. "You know what I like about it? I like how it makes doubt seem inevitable. It's okay to be unsure."

I blink and let that sink in. This should be off-putting, but somehow it's not. It feels like he's sharing a piece of himself.

I wish I knew his name.

"I like that, too," I say.

He says nothing for the longest moment, but I can feel him evaluating me. I stare back at him—well, at where I think his eyes are. I've got nothing to hide.

"Did you figure out how you know me?" he says.

"I've seen you around school."

"Do you know anything about me?"

The question feels heavier than it should be, which tells me there's a lot more to his story than the fact that he wears hoodies. "So far, all I know is that you like to sit beside churches and quote the Bible," I say. "And I've learned that in the last two minutes."

He gives a soft laugh that carries no humor.

"Why did you ask if I believe in God?" I ask.

He grimaces and looks away. "I forget how much of a freak I sound like when I say things like that."

"You don't sound like a freak."

He reaches into a pocket and pulls out a folded piece of paper. "I got this letter in the mail, and I was sitting here trying to figure out what to do."

He doesn't extend the letter toward me, and I wait for him to say more. When he doesn't, I say, "Do you want to share?"

He hesitates, then holds it out. I unfold the creased paper, and dark flakes drift off into the grass. I read the three short lines and try to figure out why they're upsetting.

I glance back at him. "Someone sent you a burned letter?"

"I did that. The burning."

I wet my lips. "Why?"

"Because that letter is from my father." A pause. "I haven't seen him in ten years." Another pause, a heavier one. "For reasons."

"Reasons," I echo. I study him, trying to identify the emotion

I hear in his voice. Trying to figure out what would inspire someone to burn a letter after not seeing someone for ten years. At first I thought it might be anger, because there's a thread of that in his voice, but it's not.

When I figure it out, I'm surprised. "You're afraid," I whisper.

He flinches—but doesn't correct me. The fingers brushing through Texy's fur are tight, almost white-knuckled.

I consider my hypercritical mother, my laid-back father. We've argued, but I've never been *afraid* of them.

For reasons.

Abruptly, he unfolds from the ground. He's bigger than I expected, tall and lean with broad shoulders. He moves like a ninja, all silent, fluid motion.

Looking at him now, I can't imagine him being afraid of anything.

But then he says, "I need to go home."

He sounds a little spooked, so I'm surprised when he puts out a hand to help me up. He's strong. His grip makes me feel weightless.

Once I'm on my feet, he doesn't move. Light from somewhere catches his eyes and makes them glint under the hood. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For seeing me." Then he turns, jogs across the street, and disappears into the darkness beyond.

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