

PROLOGUE

When the autumn breeze blows and stirs up a sense of adventure, I find myself wishing that I could embark on a grand quest full of danger, a journey to an unknown world. A quest of epic proportions that ends in a glorious blaze of heroics before I return home to resume the life that I had left behind for a time. This is only the wishful musings of a normal girl bored with the way things are. Then again, it might not be.

My story begins much like any other, but don't be deceived! This story is nothing like any other you have ever read—or heard, as the case may be. At least, I don't think it is. But who am I to say such a thing? You must read it and decide for yourself.

So. Here it is. I hope you enjoy the ride—or the read, rather.

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CHAPTER FIRST

Field Trip

“This bus needs two more passengers!” Mr. Jones shouted.

I rushed forward to board. I liked riding with Mr. Jones because he let us be a little rowdy and have fun during our field trips. I returned the hello he gave me as I signed my name on his clipboard. Then I raced up the bus’ narrow stairs, hoping to get a good seat. I scanned the rows and rows of faces, but didn’t spot my best friend. I sighed and headed toward the back, saying hello to various peers as I went.

“Sterling, do you have a copy of the itinerary?” someone called.

“No, I don’t,” I replied, turning to see who had asked. It was Miss Rosa, the youth group’s tall, pretty event coordinator. She reached into her Daytimer and slid out a pristine copy of the itinerary.

“Here you go,” she said, holding it out to me. “We had to make a last-minute change to allow someone to get back in time for a doctor’s appointment, so you’ll need to call your mom and let her know that she needs to pick you up early.”

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I tried not to show my irritation as I took the sheet from her. “Um, I drove here. My mom’s out of town.”

Miss Rosa frowned and stared at me. Her dark eyes, which were a stark contrast to her pale complexion and blonde hair, were filled with condescension. “That’s right. You are driving, aren’t you? I forgot. Hmm. Well, then, you’re okay.”

“Yeah, thanks,” I murmured as I went back to the task of trying to find a seat. I found the very back row of seats empty and slid in to sit by the window. I folded the itinerary without even reading it and stuffed it into my jacket pocket. *Why does she have to be so...snooty?* I wondered. I looked out over the parking lot, trying to find my best friend, but he wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

“Are you looking for Will?”

I turned to find two big brown eyes staring at me over the top of the seat in front of me. “Hey, Kailey,” I said with a smile. “Have you seen him?”

Kailey, who could easily have been related to Miss Rosa because of her looks, shook her head as she rose and came to sit next to me. Despite the six years between our ages, she and I were pals. Most of the time she acted like a little sister. She leaned forward secretively and lowered her voice. “No, I haven’t, but I did overhear Mrs. Brooks telling Mr. Jones that she ‘shall see to it that the young man boards *her* bus, thank you.’” She copied the older woman’s British accent. A mischievous gleam danced in her eyes. Her manner was nothing like Miss Rosa’s.

“Okay, so what does that mean?”

“Dunno. Maybe she thinks she has to keep you two apart for some reason.”

I chuckled. “You mean the way she did with Charlie and Rachel?”

“Yeah, something like that. We all know she looks down

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on chemistry in youth groups.”

“Chemistry?” I raised a brow. “Just what are you implying?”

Kailey scrunched her nose. “Do you think the rest of us are blind or something?”

I gave her a no-nonsense look and crossed my arms.

She leaned closer. “Everyone in this youth group knows that you and Will are more than just best friends. All we have to do is look at you two together! It’s as plain as the freckles on my nose.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Kailey,” I replied quietly, though somewhere in my heart, I knew that it was half true. “After all, you’re only fourteen.” I looked out the window in an attempt to hide the blush creeping up my throat. I was suddenly very glad that Will hadn’t made an appearance. How could I be around him now and not give away the fact that Kailey’s words had hit a mark? I turned back to Kailey, only to find her watching me with a smug expression. “What?”

Kailey laughed and draped an arm over my shoulders. “I could spot that blush a mile away, girlie, so don’t even try to hide it.”

I groaned and ducked my head, pretending to find my cable-knit fingerless gloves very interesting. “Why do you do this to me?”

“It’s okay that you and Will have chemistry,” she said seriously. “You have the right kind of chemistry—the kind that’s born out of knowing each other forever and growing together in the Lord. There’s nothing wrong with that.” She sounded much wiser than her years.

I raised my head and met her eyes. “Is it really that noticeable? I mean, we’ve never talked about anything beyond friendship—except maybe siblingship since we’re so close.”

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“Siblingship?” Her brows drew together. “Is that even a word?”

“It’s my word.”

“Yeah, I figured as much.”

Just then the bus’s engine started with a deep rumble that vibrated us in our seats. The sweet smell of diesel fuel wafted in before Mr. Jones closed the bus doors and called for everyone to settle in.

Kailey stood and returned to her place, sending a wink at me as she went.

I glared at her and then occupied myself with trying to see who would be sitting next to me, but no one was standing. *That’s odd. Mr. Jones never leaves a seat empty.*

“Ladies and gents, may I have your attention, please?” Mr. Jones stood at the front end of the aisle with his hands behind his back. He always stood like that when making any kind of announcement. His graying hair was wild as usual and was totally opposite the neat, professor-like clothing he wore. His appearance was an illustration of his personality; he could be extremely funny, but also very somber—depending on the occasion.

When the bus was quiet except for the rumble of the engine, Mr. Jones bowed his head. “Father, we ask that You bless our time on this field trip. Keep us safe on the road and give us fellowship with one another. Thank You, Lord, for this opportunity to learn about your creation through science. In your name, amen.”

Lots of amens echoed in the bus as Mr. Jones assumed his place behind the oversized steering wheel. I took a deep breath and set my bag next to me on the vacant seat. The bus was chilly, so I snapped my jacket closed and raised the hood in an effort to keep warm.

With a groan and a lurch, the bus pulled out of the church parking lot. It whined as if protesting the work as it

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picked up speed. To cover the noise, I pulled out my iPhone and slipped the ear buds into my ears. I slid my finger across the screen to unlock the device. My home screen popped up, and I tapped the music icon. I made my selection, adjusted the volume, then locked the screen. I considered grabbing my knitting, but with the bus's movement, I knew that I would get carsick. Scarlett's gloves would have to wait. I leaned back and lost myself in my thoughts as Mozart's "Concerto for 2 Pianos" serenaded me.

Some time later my classical music playlist ended, and the music stopped. *I guess I forgot to put it on repeat.* While I tried to decide on another playlist, I overheard something that caused me to forget my music for a moment.

"Nikki, did you hear about the scientist who went missing from his lab in Asheville last week?"

"I heard a little bit. Dad was watching a report on the news, but I couldn't hear all of it because I was practicing piano."

"Well, they haven't found him. There's no evidence that he was abducted, but his colleague has been really tight-lipped about it. The police think he may have played a hand in the disappearance."

"So...is this guy a criminal or something?"

"Which guy?"

"Either, I guess."

"They don't know. Apparently both of them are highly-respected, but you never know."

A third voice broke in. "Derek, where did you hear all this? I saw one report. Then I didn't hear anything about it—like it never happened. I haven't heard anything since."

"Yeah, Derek, where *did* you hear that stuff?"

"I didn't hear it. I read it on the Internet when the media stopped covering it on TV."

The conversation went on, but I tuned it out as a strange

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feeling of foreboding settled over me. I took a deep breath and tried to calm my suddenly hammering pulse. *What's going on? Why am I feeling like this?*

I returned my attention to the three teens talking, but they had moved on to discussing dirt bikes or something like that. I sighed quietly and marveled at the ability of some people to go super fast from talking about something completely serious to something completely meaningless. I shifted in my seat and folded my legs as my thoughts left the issues of immature conversation and a missing scientist and settled on the feeling that had gripped my heart. *Something is not right. I don't know what it is, but something is definitely not right.*

Needing something to distract me, I chose my favorite band's latest album and focused on the lyrics. The lead singer's voice helped me not dwell on the strange feeling as he sang words that I had long ago memorized. *"Here at your feet, I lay this day down..."*

It seemed that only a few moments passed before Mr. Jones was slowing down as we entered the city limits. "Wake up, people! We are approximately one mile from our destination."

Chatter rose in the bus as we made our way through the busy town of Gatlinburg. We had to stop at a couple of traffic lights, and I took that opportunity to check stuff out. There were shops and people everywhere, always something new vying for my attention. It had been probably ten years since my family had visited. I really didn't remember much about it, so it was almost like this was the first time I'd ever been there.

I sat up and stretched, straightening my legs, which complained about being folded for so long. I turned off my music and put my iPhone in its holster. Then I made sure that my earbuds were secured in my bag. *I must have dozed*

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or something. The ride was supposed to be over an hour long, but it didn't feel like it.

I peered out the back window and saw Mrs. Brooks' bus following us very closely. I could barely make her out behind the reflection in the windshield. I shook my head as I thought of the stern lady and her rather puzzling ways. I could picture her expression as she drove. It wasn't something one easily forgot, as she always looked blood-spitting mad whenever she was behind the wheel. No one knew why, but many assumptions involved her British heritage. One of the teens in the youth group had once joked that road rage had originated with her. That remark had earned him Mrs. Brooks' famous (or infamous?) death glare. He hadn't been heard from since—well, at least, not on that subject.

“Sterling, get your camera!” Kailey suddenly exclaimed.

“What is it?” I asked as I retrieved my mega-zoom digital camera from my bag. I turned it on and felt, rather than heard, the familiar hum as the lens slid out.

“We're here!” she replied, the excitement in her voice drawing me back to my window. I looked out and gasped as we approached the aquarium's entrance. A life-size statue of a dolphin hovered over a pond with a fountain in the center. Nearby, a sea lion perched on a rock, frozen in a curious stare. I snapped a few shots as we passed and then focused on the aquarium building itself until it went out of sight when we entered the bottom level of the parking garage. Mr. Jones found our reserved bus parking space and pulled in.

Before I knew it, I was grabbing my bag and rising to exit the bus. Kailey was right in front of me as we filed down the stairs. When we stood in a group beside our bus, she whirled around to face me and cocked her head, a pleading smile curving her lips.

I rolled my eyes and took the bait. “What is it now?” I

whined.

“Mia told me that Evelyn invited those goth kids from her school to come with her on the field trip.”

I pushed my hood off of my head and braided my dark brown hair as she talked. “Goth? Since when is Evelyn into the goth stuff?” I asked. I secured my braid with a hair band and let the plait rest on my shoulder.

Kailey shrugged and glanced around. “I don’t know, but she’s really into it. Didn’t you see her when you got to the church?”

“No. I got there late and made a beeline to Mr. Jones’ bus.”

“Well, here’s your chance to see her. She’s coming this way.” Kailey discreetly nodded toward the other bus.

I tried to prepare myself, but it was no use. When I saw Evelyn with her friends, all decked out in total goth attire, I gasped loudly, my mouth hanging open. Several teens nearby looked at me funny, so I snapped my mouth shut and covered it with my hand. I closed my eyes and turned away.

“Scary, isn’t it?” Kailey whispered, her voice grave. “I’ve heard rumors that she’s leaving the church. I guess it doesn’t fit with her new friends.”

I opened my eyes and nodded. “Yeah, I guess it doesn’t.” I sneaked another glance and shuddered. Evelyn, who was once one of the most pure, beautiful girls I’d ever known, had colored her lovely brown hair midnight black and lined her eyes with a generous amount of the same. Her clothes were also black—leather skirt, fishnet stockings, tall, lace-up boots. She even had a spiked dog collar-style choker around her neck and a chain around her waist. The girl looked like she’d been hanging out in a graveyard or something. Her friends, equally marred by the darkness, looked like death warmed over. And one of them kept staring at me—a dude with floppy blond hair and a nose

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ring.

Yuck. I averted my eyes even as my brain told me that he was somehow familiar. *Oh, Jesus, please get Evelyn out of that. Restore her to purity. And please make that guy stop staring at me.*

“Anyone home?” Kailey’s voice pulled me out of my prayers.

“Yes, I’m home—I mean here.” I adjusted my bag’s strap on my shoulder and met Kailey’s eyes. “I was just praying for Evelyn.”

“I don’t blame you. From what you’ve said, it really sounds like the goth thing is pretty dangerous.”

I nodded. “Yeah. I know I’ve told you this before, but when I was researching goth and emo and all that, I was shocked to see how many Christian kids are getting drawn into it. To see it in my own youth group is...well, shocking.”

“Didn’t you mention one of your friends getting into it through music?”

“Mm-hmm. It was so sad because he totally went off the deep end. He turned his back on God and his family...” I trailed off when I noticed that Kailey was no longer paying attention. “What are you looking at?”

She smiled. “Behind you.”

I frowned and turned to see Will walking toward us. It was like one of those cheesy moments in movies where the girl’s all starry-eyed over a guy who’s wickedly handsome, and all she sees is him as he approaches her in slow motion. Only this wasn’t cheesy. I wasn’t starry-eyed (at least, I don’t think I was). And it wasn’t in slow motion. But Will... he was definitely handsome. Just not wickedly so.

My heart skipped a beat when his eyes met mine, and I would have blushed if Kailey hadn’t pinched my arm, yanking me out of the moment. I could almost hear the sound of a scratching record as I whirled to face her. “What

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was that for?”

“It really is that noticeable,” she whispered. “Especially when you stand there gawking at him with that dopey look on your face.”

I growled and gave her an icy glare that I hoped would quiet her.

“Is that supposed to scare me?” she asked, a challenge in her voice. She crossed her arms.

“No. It’s supposed to make you stop talking.”

Her eyes smiled at me, and I knew that she was trying not to laugh. After a moment, though, she apparently could not hold it in any longer, so she turned and walked away, her quiet laughter barely reaching me through the noise of the crowd.

I shook my head and rubbed my arm through my jacket. I wondered how bad the bruise would be. *I guess the nickname Pinchmeister fits her better than I thought.*

“You okay?”

“I’m fine!” I exclaimed as I turned to face Will, who had come up next to me. “Except for the fact that you were late, and Kailey just pinched me.”

His dark brows lowered for a moment. “Why did she do that?”

“I—”

“Because I felt like it,” Kailey cut in, suddenly appearing beside me.

I moved away from her. “Don’t even think about it. You’re not going to pinch me again.”

“No, I’m not.” She winked. “I was just coming to let y’all know that Mr. Jones is getting ready to—”

“Let’s move out, people!” Mr. Jones shouted over the noise. “Stay with the group and follow me. We’re going to make a pit stop before we start our tour, but we’ve got to hurry.”

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“It’s about time,” someone said.

Most definitely. I stuck close to Kailey and Will as Mr. Jones led the way and Mrs. Brooks brought up the rear. A couple of times I saw her look at me disapprovingly. *I think my hypothesis was correct. Ugh, the last thing I want is antagonism from her too! Miss Rosa is enough to deal with.*

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CHAPTER SECOND

The Etched Door

“You’re awfully quiet over there,” Will said softly.

I looked up at him for a moment then down at my camera, which hung from a strap around my neck. “I am?”

“Yes, you are. Is everything all right?”

“Um, I guess,” I replied. I stole another look at him and saw that he was frowning as he gazed ahead. “I mean, nothing’s wrong. I don’t think. I just...feel out of sorts right now.”

He leaned closer. “Does it have anything to do with Kailey?”

“Yes and no,” I said. “We can talk about it later. Now isn’t the best time.”

“Hmm. I suppose I can let the matter drop for now.”

I nodded and tried to turn my thoughts onto something other than the fluttery feeling in my stomach. *What has Kailey done to me? I never used to feel this way around Will.*

“Just one more thing,” Will said.

“Yes?” I tried not to look at him.

His arm brushed mine as he walked close to me. “Did you notice that guy staring at you earlier?”

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This time I let my eyes linger on his. “Yes, I did. He really creeped me out.”

“I took care of it,” he said, an edge in his voice. “But if he does it again, let me know.”

“What do you mean, you took care of it?”

He stepped away. “I stared him down.”

I raised my brows. “Oh.” *Must be a guy thing.* I didn’t say anything else, and neither did he.

We left the parking garage via a covered sidewalk and came out into the open. I looked up at the clear blue autumn sky. Only a few high, wispy clouds marred the otherwise perfect sea of deep blue. The sun was bright and warded off the chill of the crisp breeze coming down from the mountains.

After a short walk, the front of the main building came into view, and we climbed some stairs. I went to the rail and looked out over a waterfall spilling down into a stream that fed the larger river flowing through the busy town. I snapped some photos of the waterfall and the building itself before hurrying to catch up with Kailey and Will. I wondered why Mrs. Brooks had not gotten onto me about lagging behind. Then I remembered Mr. Jones reminding her that I would be taking photos for the trip’s slideshow, which would be played for the parents next Sunday at church. This gave me special privileges that included not having to stick right with the group. *Thank you, Mr. Jones!*

Gold, amber, and crimson painted the surrounding mountains in a vivid patchwork that captured my attention. A line from a poem floated across my mind, awakening a feeling of adventure that stirred my spirit. I realized that the strange, foreboding darkness I had felt back on the bus had receded almost completely. Still, I shifted my thoughts away from it, not wanting it to come back.

We arrived at the entrance quickly enough, and Mr.

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Jones stationed two of the teen guys at the doors to hold them open for everyone else. I nodded my thanks as I passed by. As soon as I set foot inside the building, warm moist air carrying the strong smell of fish washed over me. It reminded me of the fish department of a pet store, only stronger.

I stopped in line not far behind Mr. Jones and watched as he talked to the lady at the ticket counter. He gave her an envelope, which I assumed was full of tickets. After a few moments, she waved us on and started scribbling something on a piece of paper. Nosy as I can sometimes be, I wondered what she was so frantically trying to write.

As each teen passed through the little turning things that you have to push to get through, the lady gave us our tickets, stubs torn off. I tucked mine safely in my bag. *It'll be perfect for my scrapbook.*

Mr. Jones called for our attention once everyone had accumulated around the small round aquarium situated in the open space between the gift shop entrance and the bathrooms. "Let's make our pit stop then meet right back here."

Sighs and expressions of relief sounded all through the group as we separated into two lines—one girls, one guys—and headed toward the restrooms. I felt sorry for any ladies seeking peace or quiet in the restroom. The girls were very loud, chattering about everything from guys to the color of their nail polish. Their voices seemed amplified by the tile on the walls and floor, and no matter where I went in the huge place, I couldn't get away from it. I washed my hands and left quickly, unable to stomach the ridiculousness. I did not stay long enough to grab paper towels, so I wiped my hands on my jeans. I knew it would most likely make my knuckles dry out, but at the moment I did not care. *I should have just used my waterless hand sanitizer.* I sighed and

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joined the guys waiting by the fish tank. Will was there, so I stood by him and listened to the conversation as I took a few photos.

“It is so not real,” one of the guys said, referring to the huge sea turtle skeleton hanging from the ceiling in the center of the aquarium.

“On the contrary, young man,” Mr. Jones replied. “That is a leatherback sea turtle skeleton and belonged to one of the largest specimens ever found.”

“How can you tell?” the guy asked skeptically.

“I just can. I’m a marine biology teacher, remember? Besides, I just read it on that information board right over there.” He winked. “That skeleton measures close to nine feet in length and is worth a lot of money.”

The guy crossed his arms. “I still think it’s a fake.”

Mr. Jones made an exasperated expression and adjusted his glasses. “I told you what I know. If you want to believe differently, then go ahead. But I don’t wanna be around when you tell that to the guys who bought it for the aquarium.” He looked up at the skeleton. “It never fails to amaze me when a kid who thinks he knows everything contradicts me.”

I laughed with the others as the “it is so not real” guy ducked his head and fell silent. I looked over at the information board and found that it did in fact say what Mr. Jones said it said. I snickered again and took some photos of the board and the skeleton.

When all of the noisy girls (who were still chattering, by the way) had rejoined the group, we began the tour. My favorite part was the underwater tunnel, which the brochure said was made of six-inch thick acrylic. It arched over the path and gave us an amazing view of all sorts of creatures—sharks, a sea turtle, and lots of other animals I didn’t recognize, but that grabbed my imagination.

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“I hope you’re getting tons of pics,” Kailey said as we stepped off the part of the path that moved slowly like a conveyer belt.

“Oh, I am. I’m going to need to change my camera’s memory card soon. This one’s almost full.”

Kailey grinned. “Then you *must* be taking tons of pics.”

“I’m using the rapid shot setting. It’s soooo cool.” The camera beeped as I focused on the sea turtle gliding peacefully toward me. I let the rapid shot setting take a dozen photos before I moved on.

“Sterling, check this out!”

I hurried forward and found Elliot, one of the younger teens in the group, pointing straight up at a sawfish resting on the top of the acrylic tunnel.

“Look at its mouth,” he said. “It looks like it’s smiling.”

“It sure does,” I replied as I snapped the shots.

“You’ll have to put that into the slideshow for the parents!” he exclaimed.

I nodded my agreement, but didn’t have a chance to say anything because the boy had already moved on to something else.

We left the tunnel and meandered through the deep sea room on the lower level, where they had spider crabs, some gorgeous jellies, and lion fish showing off their extravagant stripes. Eventually we found the big tank filled with lots and lots of rays. I recorded a video as a particularly large ray glided past me. After a few more exhibits, we decided to head out for lunch on the veranda. They had a café, but the food was too pricey, so the chaperones had insisted everyone bring sack lunches.

Some clouds had moved in, preventing the sun from warming the autumn air. The breeze had strengthened and sent a chill across my face as I followed the others, my stomach growling. I settled in between Kailey and Will.

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There weren't tables or chairs, so we teens sat on the cement while the chaperones took possession of the few benches around. I looked at my iPhone's screen and was surprised to see that it was after 2:00. *No wonder I'm so hungry.*

"What do you have?" Kailey asked as she pulled out her lunch, a grimace on her face. "I have a veggie burger and a spinach salad with *tomatoes.*"

"What's the matter? Don't you like eating that stuff every day?" I opened my lunch bag and pulled out a chicken salad sandwich on a croissant, a cheese stick, and some biscotti—Olivia's famous triple chocolate treat (Olivia is my godmother).

"No, I don't like it," Kailey replied. "Hey, how come you get biscotti and I don't?"

Will held up his own neatly wrapped slice. "I got one, too, for helping Olivia with yard work yesterday."

"You guys! That is so not fair! I can't help it if my mom's a health freak," Kailey fussed. She stuck out her bottom lip and slouched, staring at her food sullenly.

I shared a glance with Will before reaching into my lunch bag and pulling out an extra slice of biscotti. I held it out to Kailey, who grinned and hugged me a bit too tightly. I waved her off.

"I think you are an angel!" she exclaimed happily.

"And I think you're a chocolate addict," Will replied. "Look at how excited you are about chocolate. Not good."

I laughed and unwrapped my sandwich. Then I bowed my head to pray over my meal. The wind picked up. I opened my eyes and looked up at the weeping willow nearby. The rustling of the long sweeping boughs almost sounded like a whisper. What was it saying? I listened and realized that the quiet voice was calling my name. I wasn't sure if I was hearing it with my ears or my heart, but I knew that this call meant something. I knew Who was calling me,

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and I answered with a prayer. *Whatever You call me to, Lord, I will do it. By your grace, I will.*

The chilly air caressing my face slowed again to a gentle breeze, and I glanced at my friends, who were still conversing about chocolate. Will, however, looked at me with his brows low, and I knew that he had noticed my moment of quiet. *He won't let it go.*

I offered a small smile and took a bite of my sandwich. I joined in on the conversation some when it turned toward books. After a few comments, though, I fell silent and finished my sandwich.

Kailey talked about the latest fantasy craze to sweep the nation and how she thought the series was too weird for her liking. One of the teens not far from us asked her a question, and that sent her into a rapid-fire explanation of why the series was not worth the time of day and why every single copy ever printed should be burned. *Typical Kailey.*

“What’s going on?” Will whispered.

“I can’t say,” I replied. I turned to look at him and found him close enough that his breath warmed my cheek. His golden brown eyes bored into me, threatening to pierce my mask of calmness. I met his intense gaze and did not look away until he did.

An uncomfortable silence settled over us. It was something I had never experienced before with Will, and I didn’t like it. Something was changing in our friendship. *I should have expected this. Things can't stay the same forever,* I thought, trying not to let myself cry. I ate my cheese stick, but decided to save the biscotti for later. The emotions roiling through me would not allow me to enjoy the chocolatey treat if I ate it now. I pulled out my water bottle and downed a couple of mouthfuls then rose to throw away my trash. I put away the biscotti and water bottle as I went to ask Mr. Jones for permission to leave the group.

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“Sure. Just make sure you don’t wander too far off.”

I nodded. “Thanks. I’ll stick close.”

He smiled and went back to the PC-versus-Mac computer debate he was having with Miss Rosa. I silently cheered him on as he continued to point out all of the reasons why Macs are far superior machines. *Go, Mr. Jones!*

I made my escape before he had a chance to change his mind. I walked quickly, my eyes on the ground, and avoided the stare I felt Will aiming at me. I went inside and showed the lady my ticket and then washed my hands in the restroom to get the food stickies off. I decided to look around the gift shop to see if I could nab some postcards. I found a few I liked—one with seahorses, one with butterfly fish, and another with jellyfish—and grabbed an extra seahorse one for my younger sister before heading to the register. *Scarlett will love it.*

On the way to purchase my findings, some keychains caught my eye. I paused to look at them. They were the kind I liked—the plastic ones with the pictures inside. So I picked out one for myself, one for Scarlett, and one for Olivia. Then, determined not to see anything else I “had” to get, I made it to the register.

I left the gift shop, which had been rather stuffy, and took off my jacket as I headed toward the dining hall nearby. The doors were open, but no one was inside, as the sign said that they only served dinner, so I went in. Rows and rows of tables filled the dimly-lit room, their crisp white tablecloths stained pale blue with the light emanating from the aquarium that filled one wall. I turned on my camera and put it into the low light setting. I got some great shots of the colorful fish playing amongst the coral and whatnot. I even got a video of a group of rays gliding right in front of me, their “wings” rising and falling almost in sync with one another. I walked the length of the tank, pausing now and again to get

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more photos and videos. When I reached the end, I found the emergency exit door. The daylight coming in through the glass was weak. I looked out and saw that ominous clouds had completely covered the once-clear blue sky. *That's strange. The weather was supposed to be perfect today.*

I moved on and found a double door leading into another table-filled room. A sign on the door told me that it was the part of the dining hall that was reservation-only. I looked all around the door, but found no alarm, so I slipped in, leaving the right door ajar behind me. The room was much like the first one, but the aquarium's bottom was far below the floor of the banquet hall. I peered down into the depths, resting my forehead on the cold glass, and swallowed hard when I saw a very large form cruising through the water. I stepped away and looked up. I gasped when I found myself face-to-face with a whale shark. I chuckled at myself for being so jumpy and raised my camera to capture the gentle giant in a photo. He headed off to my left, so after wiping my forehead smudge off the glass with my sleeve, I followed him.

A pair of glass doors let in some daylight at the end of the aquarium wall. The red exit sign above the doors cast a slight glow in the dimness. As I approached, I had the strangest feeling that I had been there before. A fuzzy image floated across my mind. *My dream!* Then the full memory flooded my thoughts. *Doors. Just like these. But there was something else. What was it?* Something caught my eye, and I looked more closely. It was an etching in the glass. *Just like in my dream. Only then I couldn't read it.*

I moved closer to try to make out what it said, and as I did, the neatly-printed letters came into focus. They seemed to be animated, arranging themselves to form words. I read them slowly, whispering them into the dark solitude of the room.

The Seer

*Where children play and laughter sounds
Adventure comes in many forms
When call is made to hearts of youth
Unbidden comes a dreadful storm*

*As darkness grows in hearts of men
They take the path of wickedness
As evil covers Earth in sin
Unbidden comes a dreadful storm*

*When Tkannackck walk the earthly realm
A veil they pierce forevermore
Secret will be the hour when
Unbidden comes a dreadful storm*

The air in the room shifted, and a chill crept up my legs. As I studied the strange message, another four-line stanza slowly appeared. It was below the others, set apart just a little bit. The letters had a softer look about them, which for some reason encouraged me to read the words as I swallowed a feeling of fear.

*Though hope seems lost, there is a way
To stop the nearing threat of death
One must rise, the call obey
Yet unbidden comes a dreadful storm*

I kept my eyes on the poem, trying to understand the mysterious message. *It means something. But what?* I gave up and took a few pictures of the words so that I could study them later. As I took the last one, I heard an alarm go off. Without another thought, I fled the way I had come, the shrill tone pursuing me. I burst through the double doors and

The Etched Door

ran into someone. I raised my head and found Will staring down at me oddly. I realized that I was in his arms and stepped away quickly, glad that the room was dark enough to hide my blushing. I noticed that the alarm had stopped.

“Sterling. Would you mind telling me what’s going on?” he asked in a low tone.

“You didn’t hear the alarm?”

He narrowed his eyes. “No, I didn’t. Now, what’s going on?”

“Um, I...” I fiddled with my camera strap and looked at the carpet-covered floor. “I found something.”

“Okay. So why did you run out of there like that? Did you get into trouble?”

I frowned at him. “No, I didn’t get into trouble.”

“That’s surprising,” he said wryly. “What did you find?”

“A poem. It’s etched into the glass on one of the exit doors.”

Will gave me one of those do-you-know-how-ridiculous-this-sounds? looks. “I think you’d better show me the poem. I have a feeling that there’s more to this than meets the eye.”

I nodded and led the way back into the banquet hall. When we were a few yards from the mysterious glass doors, I stopped and pointed. “It’s on the right-hand side.”

Will stepped around me and went over to the doors. “I don’t see anything on this one.”

“It’s just above the handle.”

“I don’t see anything,” he repeated. He motioned me over. “See for yourself.”

I hesitantly joined him in front of the doors. The poem was nowhere to be seen. “It was right here, I promise.”

“Are you positive?”

“Yes, I am. I—”

“Do you feel that?” he whispered. He bent over and stretched his hand down toward the floor.

The Seer

“You mean the chill?”

He straightened and nodded. “It’s only in my legs, though. I didn’t feel it when I put my hand down there.”

“I noticed it when I finished reading the poem. Then an alarm went off, and that’s when I high-tailed it out of here.”

“Something is definitely going on here, and I don’t like it,” he whispered, an edge in his voice. He grabbed my arm and pulled me with him as he headed back toward the restaurant doors. Without warning, he stopped dead in front of the doors, his fingers still tight around my arm.

I opened my mouth to ask him what he was doing, but before a word had left my lips, my eyes landed on a crudely-written message scrawled across both of the doors. The white paint stood out against the dark wood even in the room’s dim lighting.

YOU HAVE UNLEASHED THE TKANNACKCK

“That last word...it was in the poem,” I breathed. My hands shaking, I turned on my camera and took a photo as an overwhelming feeling of dread encompassed me. The chill in my legs spread with alarming speed. I felt it in my stomach as it seemed to make a beeline to my heart. Blackness danced along the edges of my vision. “Get me out of here, Will. I think I’m going to pass out.”

Will lifted me into his arms and quickly left the room with its creepy message behind. “You’re going to be fine, Sterling. I’m taking you outside for some fresh air.”

I tried to concentrate on what he was saying, but he sounded distant. The blackness spread across my vision, pulling me in. But in the midst of the darkness, I saw a pinpoint of light as a still, small voice whispered, ***You are the seer.***

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