

Part One  
Kira Conners

“What is life? A madness. What is life? An illusion, a shadow, a story. And the greatest good is little enough; for all life is a dream, and dreams themselves are only dreams.”

-Pedro Calderon de la Barca

**17 April 2014**

The sound of my heartbeat drumming in my ears was deafening. The sun had already set beyond the horizon, leaving only a faint glow in the distance to guide me. I still hadn't come to the full realization of what I had just done, my mind was focused solely on the task ahead. I cursed at my feet for tripping often over tree roots and fallen limbs as I ran. Outstretched branches cut at my arms and tore at my clothes as I pushed through the thick brush of the woods. It was a cool spring evening and the wind ripped through me, chilling the sweat that formed on my skin. The only thing between my feet and the unforgiving ground were my dirty, worn socks. The rocks and twigs dug painfully into my feet, slowing me down. I could see the LED lights from their flashlights as they tracked me.

"Kira!" A loud voice rang out. "Come back. We only want to help you."

I forced myself onward, the muscles in my legs beginning to burn, my lungs and throat now raw from the cold air. I veered left towards the old bridge. I wasn't sure how much further I was going to be able to run, my chest beginning to feel heavy and tight. As luck would have it, just then I heard the faint ambient swooshing of running water. *The river!*

I was getting close.

Feeling a warm trickle on my arm, I looked down. Blood soaked my bandages and ran in a curved line from my wrist to my elbow. *Damn!* I must have ripped open my stitches. I looked around and, not seeing the lights anymore, stopped and leaned against a tree to catch my breath. I wiped the blood from my arm with the front of my shirt. I had never been a good judge of distance, but if I had to guess, I would say that I ran at least a good mile and a half at top speed, propelled purely by adrenaline.

I peeked around the tree and, squinting my eyes, saw the break in the woods that led to the field where the river started. I pushed myself off of the tree and walked to the clearing. Stepping through the wood line the wind hit me with force, swirling my hair around my face; it felt soothing against my hot skin. Just up ahead was the river, the current moving much faster than usual. I was startled by a voice behind me, making me jump and freeze in my tracks.

"Kira, don't move. We are going to take you back to the hospital and get you some help, okay?" I turned around to see Dr. Gordon standing only a few feet away from me, her hands held up in appeasement.

"I know all of this is very overwhelming and you are frustrated. I don't want to hurt you. Come back with us and we can get this whole thing straightened out," she went on. She was wearing casual clothes, not the normal white coat. Her purple sweater was torn on the sleeve and her hair, now fallen out of its

bun, rested over her shoulders in blonde waves with bits of leaves sticking out here and there.

I glanced over my shoulder at the bridge and then back at Doctor Gordon again. I *had* to do this, there was no other way! I turned around, facing my salvation, and darted for the bridge.

“No!” She screamed.

I could hear her heavy foot steps behind me as she ran after me. I put everything I had left into willing myself faster toward the river. I ran up onto the wooden bridge, to the edge, and threw myself over, plummeting into the icy water below.

## **One Day Ago**

The light shining in from the window seemed brighter than I remembered and made my eyes water. I guess being inside with only dim florescent lights to see by had its side effects. I sat in a disagreeable wooden chair at a wooden table across from Doctor Elizabeth Gordon. She was an older women, in her fifties maybe, with blonde hair and slim features. She had a small, calm voice, yet it held a sense of authority behind it.

"Can I get you anything? Some water?" Dr. Gordon asked, sitting down opposite me at the table.

"Sure," I replied. The hospital attire wasn't very fashionable: plain navy blue sweats and a shirt to match. But, I had to admit, it was fairly comfortable. I watched Dr. Gordon as she stood to get my water from the small side table by the window. She moved fluidly with grace and purpose.

"Have you taken your medications today?" She asked, setting the glass of water down in front of me before taking her seat.

I took a sip of water and nodded.

"Good. Let's get started then, shall we?"

"There's not much to tell." I looked down at my hands resting on my lap, examining the white gauze that were wrapped around each wrist. They irritated

my skin and I itched at them absentmindedly.

"Don't do that." She advised, knowing what I was doing without having to see my hands. "You don't want to rip your stitches. The more you leave it alone the better it will heal."

"What is it that you want to know?" My voice was flat and apathetic.

"For starters, I would like to know why you did that." She pointed to where my hands rested.

I placed my hands on the table, palms up. I stared at my wrists, debating her question. Why *did* I do this?

"Were you trying to kill yourself?" She asked in a low and even tone.

"Yes... no... I don't know."

"That's not really much of an answer."

"Maybe you aren't asking the right questions." I said narrowing my eyes at her, feeling provoked by her interrogation. It was always the same questions over and over: How do you feel? Do you want to talk about it? Why did you cut yourself? Why didn't you ask for help? Blah, blah, blah...

"I'm not trying to anger you, Kira." Dr. Gordon remained expressionless. "What is the question I *should* be asking then?"

"Maybe the question isn't *why*."

"I'm not sure I follow." She scribbled some notes on her pad of paper. I hated when she did that. If you were going to make assumptions about me, I should at least know what they are.

"I don't know why. I don't even know if there is a

why. Maybe the question is *what* happened."

"Okay then... what happened? Start from the beginning." She urged.

"Does it even matter?" I inquired, looking up at her.

"Of course it matters. In order for us to let go and move forward from our past, we must first understand it and be able to accept it. Sometimes we have to know our darkness before we can appreciate the light." All this knowledge and insight that was contained in such a small person astounded me sometimes. She was right, I knew she was right, she knew she was right. There was a hint of a twitch at the edge of her mouth that gave away the sense of satisfaction that she held from her triumph.

"Okay, but the beginning's not where it started."

"Fair enough." She leaned back, relaxing into her chair. "Tell it to me your way."



## Fall 2013

Greyson tapped his foot anxiously, staring at me from across the table. “Why exactly do you keep coming here?” he asked sternly. He’d been becoming more irritable during our last few visits, even cutting the last one short.

“Do I need a reason to visit you?” I tossed back at him. Greyson dropped his gaze to his hands which were laid out on the table evenly in front of him.

“I’m sorry. I guess I’m just a bit off. They’ve changed my medication again. They added something to help me sleep. I get kind of short fused when I’m sleep deprived.”

“I hate it when you have to go through that.”

“Yeah, tell me about it. I even had to increase my sessions with the counselor.” The words came out lifelessly. Even pretending to care made him visibly tired. “How has your week been, Kira? It has to be a lot more interesting than mine. Who am I kidding? Anything is more interesting than staring at four white walls all day long.” My heart sank as he looked up at me with his empty blue eyes and forced a smirk on his face.

I, too, forced a shadow of a smile and began recounting my uneventful week consisting of work, school and home. “I got an A on the history exam!” I

said with as much enthusiasm as I could muster.

His face seemed to light up slightly. "That's great! I guess all that studying we did last week paid off."

"I'll be able to visit you more often since I'm all done for the semester now." I said, unable to hide my excitement. Greyson doesn't really approve of me coming here so frequently but he would never say no to the company. This was the third time Greyson had been in some form of drug rehab. He was now staying at a hospital that offered him boarding along with his rehab. It must get pretty lonely when the only people to talk to don't even know the difference between you, a real person sitting in front of them, and the voices in their head carrying on a conversation about which chair is more comfortable to sit in.

"You know you don't have to come here more than you feel comfortable with." He said with concern.

"You're my best friend, Greyson. I love coming to visit you." I felt touched that he was so concerned about my wellbeing, yet at the same time, I couldn't help feeling a little hurt that he would be so okay with not seeing each other as much.

His face softened. "I know that. You're my best friend too, Kira. Which is why I worry about you coming to a place like this all the time."

"Worry about me?" I laughed lightly. "It's not like you're contagious."

He returned my laugh. "I wouldn't say that just yet. I think you've been a bit crazier since you've

been visiting me here. I think I'm starting to wear off on you." He joked, winking at me.

We laughed together and poked fun at each other for the better part of an hour.

Just as I was feeling almost happy sitting here across from Greyson, sharing harmless jokes towards one another, a soft knocking came at the door. I was so lost in our conversation that I jumped a little, forgetting where we were.

"Time's up. Evening group therapy starts in ten minutes," was all that the nurse said, leaving the door half open.

"I guess that's my queue." I stood and gathered my handbag and we shared a quick hug. "Until next time" I said as I turned, looking back at Greyson just before exiting the small visiting room. He returned my smile with one of his own and off I went back to my own lonely institution.

Greyson didn't have any close living relatives so the time that the hospital allowed for family therapy they just let him visit with me. I had met Greyson just after he got out of rehab the second time. I hadn't known that he'd been an addict. It's not something that comes up very easily in conversation when you first meet.

*Hi, I'm Greyson. Oh, by the way, I'm an addict and just got out of rehab. Want to be friends?*

You see my point? And besides, he was doing really well, for almost a year that is. That's when I started seeing the other side of him that he kept locked away. He told me about his problem and that

he'd been in rehab before. I told him that if he wanted us to continue to be friends that he had to go get help. To my surprise, he went without another word.

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As I walked through the door of my apartment, sitting my keys on the side table, I stopped and looked around. A third-hand couch sat in front of a small 28 inch flat screen that I had acquired last Christmas from my mom. I suspected that the only reason she got it for me was that she was tired of having to watch her shows on my old tube TV (complete with green and red horizontal lines running up and down the picture) when she came to visit when she needed some "girl-time" away from one of her new boyfriends (which I didn't mind since my mom was my only immediate family after my father ran out on us). A wobbly coffee table sat in between the two with a vase of purple flowers, the petals half fallen off due to chronic forgetfulness when it comes to watering plants. The kitchen wasn't much to look at either: a toaster oven, microwave and a small coffee maker was all that filled the counters. I didn't even own a dining table. Guess you don't really need one when it's dinner for one in front of the TV every night.

*And Greyson thinks his life lacks excitement,* I thought to myself.

As I walked into the kitchen the exhaustion hit me. I hadn't realized how tired I was. As I was mulling

over today's visit with Greyson I placed some leftover Chinese takeout into the microwave. Waiting for the beep, I tried to concentrate on the positives: Greyson was getting the help he needed and hopefully would be well enough to go home sometime soon. Even though my hopes were after all exactly that, just hopes, I couldn't bring myself to accept any other possible outcome. I refused to believe that he would be stuck in a revolving door, in and out of rehab; or worse, overdosing and being found dead on his bathroom floor. The microwave gave its signal bringing me out of my transient thoughts and I made my way to the couch to watch a little TV as I ate.

There wasn't much on, considering it was a Saturday evening. Most people would be hanging out with friends or having fun with their significant other. I guess it puts a damper on things when your best friend is locked up in a mental hospital that has limited visiting times. I decided to call it an early night and placed my plate in the sink and made my way through the narrow hallway to my bedroom. I changed into some sweats and a t-shirt and climbed into bed. Reaching over, I clicked off the side lamp and lay back, shutting my eyes. The moon was bright tonight, shining in through the window, making it difficult to fall asleep. I turned onto my side and tried to burry myself in the blankets just enough so that the light wouldn't bother me.

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*I lay in a single bed on top of the white sheets, my*

hands perfectly still at my sides. I looked around only to find each wall blank except for one with a small, barred window. I could see the same bright moon outside shining in. There was a small dresser that had three drawers and sitting on top was my hairbrush and my half-wilted purple flowers. Standing up, I walked over to the window and looked out it to see the weeping willow tree that Greyson always mentions when I visit. It looks so beautiful in the moon light, I can see why he likes it so much. I attempted to crack open the small window to no avail, even trying to shake and pull at the bars. I wanted more than anything to feel the cool fall breeze against my skin, breathe in the crisp scented air and listen to the sound of the wind caressing the leaves of the tree. I didn't understand why my heart was heavy with an emotional yearning to be anywhere but in here. If I wasn't able to get out through the window, I would just have to find another exit.

I walked over to the door and slowly turned the door knob. Trying to be as quiet as possible, I gently opened the door only wide enough to squeeze through. Tiptoeing out into the hallway, I decided to go in the opposite direction from the soft light spilling into the hallway from an unmanned desk a few doors down. I tried to walk quickly without giving myself away. I must have passed a half a dozen more rooms before finally seeing the door labeled STAIRS. I felt a sense of relief come over me as I made my way over to the door. Then, as if someone had flipped a switch, my breath suddenly caught in my throat and my heart picking up pace. I tried to calm my nerves as I reached out to push the door open but, just as I began to make my way through the opening, a hand caught my

*shoulder and I felt all the hope drain away from me.*

~

Startled awake, I found myself gasping for air (apparently I had been holding my breath while I slept). A faint layer of cold sweat covered my body. I looked over at the alarm clock on the night stand only to be stared back at by bright red numbers reading 2:13. I released a sigh of frustration knowing that I'd be lucky to get back to sleep at all tonight. I kicked the covers off and swung my legs out of bed. Steadying myself as I stood, I walked a few steps down the hall and into the bathroom. My hand searched the left wall for the light switch a lot longer than someone who has lived in the same apartment for the past 3 years should. Squinting once the light flooded the small space, I turned on the faucet and let the water run through my fingers. Once it was ice cold, I cupped my hands under the stream and splashed the water onto my face and neck, letting the cool liquid soothe me. I turned off the water and grabbed the hand towel to dry my face off. After putting the towel back on the holder, I took a look in the mirror now that my eyes were better adjusted to the blinding light. Minus the dark circles under my eyes, frizzed-out ponytail and pale lips I didn't look half bad for only getting four hours of sleep.

Staring blankly at my reflection, my head swam with the remnants of my night terrors. I hated my dreams, they were always the same, always so vivid; caught in a place I didn't quite understand and could never escape. I was thankful for the dreamless nights

when they came, although they were few and far between. I began feeling envious of people in comas and of Greyson (at least he got prescribed some good medications for his sleep issues). My chest clinched with the thought of him. Every day that I wasn't able to see him seemed like an eternity. I'd never really felt this way about anyone before. Sure, I'd had boyfriends and friends in the past that I cared about, but not like this. No, this was different. I felt some strange connection with him ever since we met and I couldn't quite put my finger on it. He felt like such an important part of my life, reasons for which I couldn't place. We call ourselves friends, but that term didn't fit us the way it should. It was as if we were destined to meet and be part of each other's lives. I smiled to myself at the thought.

Thinking such deep thoughts so early wore me out. I decided to leave such intensities for when the sun was up and I turned to switch off the bathroom light. Engulfed in shadowy darkness, I felt my way back to my bed and collapsed down on my pillow. I threw my arm over my face, forcing my eyes shut until I drifted back to sleep.



## Fall 2013

The rest of the week went on in a mundane fashion. I picked up more hours at the small, corner coffee shop that I worked at while I was between semesters. On the slow days I would imagine Greyson walking in through the door and up to the counter to surprise me with his discharge from the hospital. He would order a cup of coffee and I would take off work early so that we could chat and hang out the rest of the day like we used to do. We'd walk through the park, go see a movie, grab a bite to eat. I would fill him in on all the latest gossip, which would be a short conversation seeing as I don't have much of a social life. It would be like nothing ever happened. Like all of this was just a bad dream, just another one of my restless nights with my inescapable nightmares.

Thursday came quick and dragged on. I was anxious to leave work. Too often I found myself having to shake off my daydreaming of Greyson while I cleaned the back room. It was hard to get any work done when I kept seeing those deep blue eyes and the curve of his mouth when he smiled and how strong his arms felt every time he hugged me goodbye...

*Oh my, I thought.*

Greyson and I didn't have what I would

necessarily call “history” but we did have somewhat of a moment before he went back into rehab. We had always said that we were just friends until that night, and then it just got complicated. I guess I shouldn’t be too surprised that I was having residual feelings. Nevertheless, I forced the thoughts away and told myself that just friends is exactly what we needed to be right now.

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It was about half past four and I could have sworn the clock had said the same time for the past twenty minutes. Luckily, the manager came in just then and, seeing that we hadn’t had a customer in almost an hour, let me leave early. A feeling of relief came over me as I untied my apron and hung it on the hook next to the back door then grabbed my handbag from my cubby and headed home.

Just as I put my key in the door to walk into my apartment my phone rang. I quickly turned the latch, unlocked the door, and threw my handbag down searching its endless pit for my cell, finding it just before the last ring.

“Hello?” I asked curiously, not recognizing the number on the caller ID.

“Hey there, baby. It’s been way too long since I’ve heard from you,” said an overly familiar voice.

“Max?” I didn’t need to ask as I already knew it was him, just some part of me wished that I was wrong.

“Who else would it be?”

“How’d you get my number?” I instantly knew

the answer without having to wait for him to respond.

"I ran into your mom the other day at the gas station and she gave me your new number. I tried the number I had for you before but it had been disconnected." He said very matter-of-fact.

Rolling my eyes, I made a mental note to have a very serious conversation with my mother. I contemplated hanging up the phone but hesitated, knowing Max all too well that he would just continuously call back until I agreed to talk to him.

I sighed "Imagine that. What do you want?" Failing to hide my discontent, the unpleasantness I felt at the sound of his voice leaked through my own.

"I just want to talk, Kira." His voice was calm and inviting, just like before, just like in the beginning. Lucky for me, I knew him, the real him, and I knew enough to not trust that serpent tongue of his.

With my best go-the-fuck-away tone I said, "I don't have anything to say to you, Max."

"Please, just hear me out. And if I know you half as well as I do, then I know that there are plenty of things you would like to say to me." He said with a slight laugh. "How about we grab something to eat? Maybe we can go to the bistro down the block?"

I knew what he wanted without having to have dinner with him. He wanted me back. I wondered what angle he was working this time. "I really don't think that's a good idea." I replied.

"Listen, I know I haven't given you very many reasons to trust me, or even like me, but I've made a

lot of improvements. I just want a chance to show you how far I've come." He sounded sincere which made me even more cautious... like the calm before the storm.

"I've heard this before, Max. I'm not interested in going down that road with you again." I said.

"I'm not asking you to be my girlfriend again. I thought we'd start with friends." Max suggested.

I kept coming back to the thought that he wouldn't give up. He'd keep calling until I saw him. I rolled my eyes in annoyance (a habit Max always hated). "Fine, but just dinner, and I'm paying for my own meal." I conveyed my terms.

"I'll meet you at the restaurant in an hour." He said quickly and hung up.

~

I stood in the middle of my apartment staring at my phone. I felt a mixture of shock and disbelief. Not to mention a little self loathing for agreeing to dinner, terms or no terms. It had been over a year since I'd spoken to him and even longer since I'd seen him. All of those memories and emotions that I thought I had left behind came rushing back. I dreaded what the evening held and would be happy to just get this done and over with so that Max would leave me be.

Max was like a snake: smooth, quick and dangerous. We had met in our global communications class freshman year of college. I had looked over to the table next to mine and there he sat, wearing a black leather jacket, looking at me with

those dark, endless eyes. He flashed a seductive smile my way and I, like any other girl would have felt, was completely taken off guard. This handsome, mysterious man was staring right at me! Out of all the other girls that were in the class, he was interested in *me*. So I did the only thing I could think of... I smiled back. I had willingly stepped right into the cobra's grip without even realizing it.

I walked into the bathroom, opened the shower curtain, and turned the water to hot. I undressed and took my hair out of its ponytail. I stepped into the shower once the room started to steam up and let the water run down my face and body as I felt myself begin to relax. I closed my eyes and tilted my head back into the stream of water, soaking my hair to wash it.

After shaving and cleansing myself of the workday, I stepped out and toweled off. I brushed my hair out and put it up into a loose bun. I wrapped the towel around me and walked to the bedroom. I stopped in front of my closet, at a loss as to what to wear. I wanted something that said independent and confident without showing off too much. I searched the hangers looking for something that conveyed the exact message I was trying to get across to Max: happily *not* interest. I settled on a fall chic look with a deep green sweater dress with black boots. I applied minimal makeup, consisting of a small amount of loose powder foundation and mascara, deciding less would be better.

I grabbed my black jacket with the belt and buckle

that wrapped around the middle, giving me a more hourglass figure. I decided to walk the three blocks to the restaurant even though the evening air had cooled. I hoped the fresh air would keep me level-headed enough not to do anything rash like turning into Miss Hyde the moment I see Max and go completely psycho on him. I rounded the corner of the bistro and stopped dead in my tracks. There he stood, just as I remembered him: tall with a lean muscular build and short dark hair that he wore in a messy, gelled bed-head style. He wore dark navy jeans, a white button up shirt and a black leather jacket. He had an irresistible attraction that would have almost any girl swooning, what with his athletic build. However, I was fortunate enough to be savvy to his game and became very skilled on how to counter his moves over the course of our relationship. I took a deep breath and decided that the faster I get this started the sooner it would be over.

~

I forced myself to put one foot in front of the other until I was standing in front of him. I looked up at him, remembering every detail of his face all too well. The red and green light of the restaurant's neon open sign was casting harsh shadows over us, making him look older than he was. He had a small scar just beside his right eye that you wouldn't even notice unless you knew it was there. A bone chilling cold ran through me as I stared into those black, empty eyes.

"Wow Kira, you look great!" Max said. He had a

suave stance that he managed to pull off all too well.

"Thanks." I said with as much indifference as I could. "So, are you going to keep a hungry woman waiting in the cold or are we going to get this over with?"

Max chuckled. "There's that good old Kira humor I remember so well."

*If he thought that was funny, he will think I'm hilarious before tonight was over.*

I followed his lead towards the bistro's entrance. Max opened the front door and held it open as I stepped in, surely only doing so for the opportunity to check out my ass.

"Hello, welcome to Marcello's Bistro." the hostess said with a ridiculously cheery attitude, her smile widening at the sight of Max. "How many will be in your party this evening?"

"We have reservations for two under Lacey." Max said smoothly.

"Right this way, Mr. Lacey." She said after checking the list and finding a suitable table to place us at. The hostess turned and made a very apparent effort to swing everything she had from side-to-side as we followed her back to the booth.

She sat the menus on opposite sides of the table and looked at Max as she said "Enjoy your meal." I rolled my eyes and took my seat.

A tall, thin girl approached our table with bread and dipping oil in hand. She had bleach blonde hair that she wore down in curls around her slender face and, upon seeing Max, flushed a deep red.

*Great.. Another one...* I thought to myself.

"What can I get you tonight?" She asked, her voice shaky.

After a moment of glancing over the choices, I ordered a glass of Merlot, a cup of the soup of the day to start with and the fettuccine alfredo with grilled salmon for my entree. Max ordered a domestic beer and the evenings special: lasagna. We handed our menus back to the waitress who, eyeing Max the whole time, flashed a large smile at him before she went to put our order in. I grabbed a slice of bread and dipped it into the oil and herb mixture. I was already a piece of bread down before either one of us decided to talk. It was Max who broke the silence.

"So how have you been?" He asked.

"Why don't we bypass the small talk and get to the point. Why did you want to see me?" I said unable to hide the aggravation in my tone.

Max squared his shoulders and leaned forward onto his elbows, closing the space between us, and looked up at me through dark lashes. "I've been trying to be a better man."

"And what does that have to do with me, exactly?" I said taking another bite of bread, trying to remain unaffected by what he said.

Just then, the waitress appeared with our order. I was happy to have something warm to eat after my cold walk. Max took a long drink of his beer. I, too, was happy for the diversion the alcohol would give to my nerves.

"I know it has taken me longer than it should have



to realize this, but I know now that if I have any chance of having you in my life, even just as friends, then I needed to get myself in check.” He said before shoving a fork full of lasagna in his mouth.

“You’ve been getting yourself in check?” I said in disbelief.

“I’m a work in progress.” Max said with a smirk.

“Unless you’re able to go back and undo the past, I don’t think there’s much else you could do that would make me change my mind.”

“Look, I know I was a terrible friend to you and an even worse boyfriend. I also know that there is nothing that I can do or say to change what happened that night. I still go to bed every night wishing I would have done things differently. I tried to blame it on being young and stupid, but mostly I think I was just selfish and only looking out for myself and what I wanted.” Max said, his tone low, almost bashful.

“Is that regret I’m detecting? That’s got to be an unusual emotion for you.” I said sarcastically, staring at him over my wine glass before taking a drink.

“You have no idea. And it doesn’t get better with time. It just keeps growing until one day I think it will actually consume me.” If I didn’t know Max previously I would have probably thought that he was being genuinely honest. So this is the game he wants to play - guilt ridden bad boy gone straight for the girl of his dreams. All while trying to make *me* look like the one who is losing out if I don’t give him another chance.

I removed my silverware from the cloth napkin

and placed them on the table next to my plate. Who would have thought that a situation like this would make one so famished? I twirled some noodles around my fork and took a bite. *Simply delicious.* Although, I shouldn't be surprised, the bistro always has good food and it's never let me down before.

After eating almost half of my food in silence, I looked up at Max who was also lost in his plate.

"You're not going to let this go, are you?" I asked. Max was the kind of guy who couldn't, or wouldn't, let stuff go. He'd never been good at that sort of thing. Perhaps that's how he got most of the girls he'd slept with. Persistence pays off...

Max put his fork down and looked up at me, his expression unreadable. "I told you," he said with a tone that almost sounded wounded, "all I wanted was the opportunity for dinner and to talk to you. I know I was a jerk before, but I'm a man of my word, Kira. It may have taken me a while, but I've grown up. Just think about it, okay? You have my number. If I don't hear another word from you then I'll take that as a no, but if you change your mind, just call me."

"Don't hold your breath." I retorted.

Max signaled for the waitress and asked for the checks. After I paid for my dinner, boxed up the rest of my plate, and said a quick goodbye to Max, I stepped out into the autumn night and started my walk home. I was glad Max didn't offer me a ride home. That was another argument that I really didn't want to have. Max's words replayed over in my

mind with each step. I refused to believe that anything he said he actually felt. Words to Max were just that and nothing more; they held no deeper meaning to him. He shoved away any sympathetic emotions he had. That man ran purely on self-indulgence and pride and he made every effort to make sure he put himself first. I rolled my eyes as I thought about how stupid I was to not see his true colors before.

Once home, I placed me leftovers in the fridge and changed into flannel pajamas. I climbed into bed and set my alarm for eight o'clock. I felt drained as I lay back on my pillow. Boy, did I have a lot to fill Greyson in about on our visit on Saturday! I smiled to myself, thinking about how Greyson's handsome face always lights up when he sees me, and drifted off to sleep with the image dancing in my mind.

## Spring 2012

"You ready to go?" Max yelled from down the hall.

I was almost knee deep in who-knows-what in my closet as I replied, "Have you seen my clutch?"

"I might be of more help if I knew what a clutch was." He said chuckling.

"Never-mind, found it!" I replied, emerging from the depths of my closet.

"Good," Max said, "I was afraid I'd have to call in a search unit just to rescue you from in there."

"Very funny," I said. "I just have to put my heels on and then I'm ready."

I put my black pumps on and did a quick last minute check in the mirror. I straightened my one shoulder light blue, sleek dress, fluffed my hair and grabbed my clutch. Getting dolled up was not a regular thing of mine. Give me sweat pants and a t-shirt any night! But, seeing as I was dating one of the hottest guys at college, slapping on some makeup every now and then was a requirement.

"You look hot" Max said, eyes looking me up and down as I walked into the living room.

"Oh, um... thanks." I said with a half smile. I wasn't used to a lot of attention from guys. *Must be the dress*, I thought to myself. The blue color did make

my eyes pop, and the fabric clung in just the right places making me look more “filled out” (which is a good thing when you have a build like mine).

We walked out of my apartment and down to the curb where Max’s 2000 Celica waited. He’d bought it used and had gotten a really sweet deal on it. It had a couple of dints and dings here and there but it ran great so I guess you can’t complain. I hurried to the passenger door and got in while Max walked around to the driver’s side. One important thing to keep in mind about Max was that he wasn’t a “gentleman” kind of guy. I’m pretty sure he’d never held a door for a girl in his life. When I shut the door I got a huge hit-you-in-the-face-like-a-brick-wall stench. His car smelled like a concoction of old socks, marijuana and stale air. I noticed a decoy air freshener shaped like a leaf hanging from the rearview mirror and wondered silently to myself how long it had been there, because it clearly was useless at this point. You would think that men would have a better sense of cleanliness by college, or at least know enough to let the car air out before a date. I imagined Max being that kid in high school whose mom had to clean his room every week for him - picking up empty soda cans and old pizza boxes. I rolled my eyes and put on my seat belt. As soon as we were both buckled in, Max put the car in gear and sped off towards the opposite end of town.

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Fifteen minutes later we pulled up to a large two-story house. My eyes widened as I took in the view: the large Victorian style brick home sat on ten or so

acres of neatly trimmed lawn; it had four white pillars along the porch with rose bushes all along the front; back to the left of the house I noticed that there sat a small red barn that perhaps once housed a horse but now appeared unused. Max had said his friend was well off but I had no idea. This place was immaculate and absolutely stunning. If I ever had future visions of my dream home, this would be it.

Max eased the Celica into the grass next to another car and shifted into park. "Sam's parents are out of state for work for the next week. She got her cousin to buy a keg and a couple bottles of liquor. Pretty cool, huh?" He said looking at me sideways as he leaned back against the seat. He turn towards me and, with a smirk on his face, placed his hand on my thigh. His hand lingered for a moment before moving to hit the release button on my seatbelt.

I shifted uneasily in my seat and, forcing a smile on my face, said "Yeah, should be fun." I moved out from under his touch, opened my door, and stumbled out, trying to balance myself in my four inch heels. Nervous didn't even begin to describe my state right now. I'd hardly ever been out on a date with a guy let alone to a house party. I inhaled deeply and let the breath go, slowly and gently, trying to calm myself. What was I so worried about? It's not like Max and I hadn't done things before. And besides, going to house parties is what the typical college student does, right? After exiting the car, I waited while Max walked around to where I stood. Placing his hand on the small of my back, he guided me towards the

house.

We stepped up onto the porch and I smelled the sweetness the breeze held from all the roses. Max knocked loudly on the large wood door and a second later the door swung upon. A large man that I didn't know stood in the doorway. He moved aside and motioned for us to come in. I took in my surroundings with awe. The foyer was breathtaking! Beneath my feet was a large area rug with a beautiful red and gold pattern. I suspected that I was either Persian or something with a similar price tag. Looking up, there was a crystal chandelier hanging from the vaulted ceiling that filled the majority of the air space. Max took my hand and led me through the foyer and to the room to the left past the gorgeous hand-crafted wooden staircase. Rounding the corner, we entered a large, spacious area filled with bodies all moving to the beat of the music coming from enormous speakers against the far wall. The main lights were dimmed to set the mood while multicolored strobes and circles flashed in sync with the music. I followed Max through the crowd, bumping into almost every person I passed. We made it to the kitchen which mimicked the rest of the house with its overwhelming, colossal feel. There was a handful of people chatting and hanging around the two kegs next to the eighteen-seat table that I imagined had hosted many years of holiday feasts. I wondered if the purchasers of such a table ever imagined it being used to support drunken young adults as they made out together.

Max walked over to the table, grabbed two red plastic cups and squeezed his way through the people standing around the keg to fill them up. A few seconds later he returned, handing me the beer. A crooked smile inched its way on his face as he raised his cup to mine, tapped them together, and took a long drink. His dark eyes watched over his cup as I also took a drink.

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A provocative electronic beat filled the room as I followed Max into the center of the pulsating crowd. He placed his hands on my shoulders and pulled me in so that we were touching and began to move his hips against mine, swaying back and forth with the music. After a while, a sudden calm came over my body out of nowhere. I did drink my beer rather quickly but usually it takes two or three for me to feel like this. I pushed away my worries, coming to the conclusion that it must have been the fact that I hadn't had anything to eat before I came here and that the beer hit me fast. I laced my hands together behind his neck and leaned in even closer as his hands slide down over my body, coming to rest just above my ass. I let him take me and lead me, like a puppet and its master. I was not habitually an "anything goes" kind of gal, but tonight felt... different. Max's touch seemed to feel elevated on some level, like feeling his hands on me for the first time. He nuzzled his nose to my ear and began kissing me slowly. I let my head fall to the side slightly, allowing him better access.



Max continued placing slow, light kisses trailing from my jaw to my collar bone as another wave of unusual feelings swept over me. I tried to concentrate on holding on to my surroundings as they seemed to fade out into the distance, losing sense of anything rational. All I could think of was the feeling of Max's body pressing into mine as we danced and the touch of his lips on my neck.

I wasn't sure how long we were dancing; time seemed to have been lost. Everything started getting fuzzy around the edges and a crushing tiredness came over me. Max stopped kissing me and moved his lips to my ear. "Come, there's something I want to show you." He said as he grabbed my hand and began to lead me out of the sea of bodies, through the kitchen and out the back door.

I knew this wasn't a good idea but for some unknown reason I didn't really give a damn (and the breeze felt good after being in that hot, crowded room). I had to hold onto Max's arm as we descended the stairs just to keep my balance. We walked side by side down the stone pathway that led to the barn. When we approached the side door I realized that I had been mistaken. It wasn't really a barn, it was a guest house with the outside built to look like an old barn. Max turned the door knob and pushed the door open. We stepped in and he flipped on the light switch revealing a cozy, fully furnished living room.

"Are we supposed to be in here?" I asked, my words coming out slightly slurred.

“It was unlocked,” was all he said.

Max ushered me into the room and closed the door behind us without locking it. I walked over to the tan couch and laid down, letting the darkness take over as I closed my eyes. I could still hear the thumping of the bass from the house even from here.

I was only half aware of the sound of Max walking over to the couch and sitting down next to me. He leaned over me and spoke softly into my ear. “Don’t go falling asleep on me now. That would be such a waste. I want you to be awake.” There was a hint of something behind his words, some sort of longing and anticipation, but frankly I was too tired to think anything more of it.

I mumbled an incoherent acknowledgment, not having the energy to speak. I felt Max begin to caress my hair, moving slowly, purposefully down to my cheek. His hand continued traveling down to my shoulder where he followed the strap of my dress down to the low-cut fabric that allowed just enough cleavage show. I struggled to move out from under his touch to no avail. I did not want to end up being that slut that slept with that one guy at that one party. A slight groan and a small stir was all I was able to manage, which Max mistakenly took as an invitation. His lips met mine with force and he shifted so that he was completely on the couch now, propped up on his elbow next to me. He grabbed my thigh, lifting it towards him so that he could place his leg in between mine, and started moving his hand up under my dress. It took all the strength I could gather up to just

placed my hand on his shoulder and attempt to push him away.

"No, please." I managed to say, although it came out soft and breathless. My attempts were useless. Max removed his hand from my thigh and grabbed my arm that I was using to try and push him away with and forced it over my head as he began kissing me again. Max released my arm after a moment to begin unbuckling his belt and undoing the button and zipper on his jeans.

Suddenly the front door swung open, flooding the room with the sound of thumping music and chatter from other partygoers at the house. I willed my eyes to open and I felt Max's body go ridged. A tall man stood in the doorway. All I could make out through my half open eyes and blurred vision was that he seemed to have lighter hair and a large, muscular frame. He just stood there, towering over the room.

"Hey, man, how about a little privacy?" Max said sternly to the man.

"I think it's time you call it a night." The man said, his voice deep and low.

At this, Max stood up, pulling up his pants that hung on his hips and buckled them. "This is none of your business so I suggest you leave and close the door on your way out and go find your own fun."

The stranger took a few steps into the room. "She doesn't look like she's having much fun." He said.

Knowing Max, he was probably close to the end of his fuse. "Listen asshole," he said angrily, "I don't know who you think you are but you need to leave."

"I will as soon as you leave her alone." The man stated, remaining calm and even toned during the altercation.

"Alright, fucker, that's it!" Max hissed as he swiftly brought back his fist and swung.

Max's fist collided with the man's jaw sending him stumbling back a step. Without hesitation the stranger returned the blow with one of his own and knocked Max backwards, hitting the coffee table that sat in front of the couch and then falling to the ground. The man then walked over to where Max had landed next to my feet and grabbed him by the arm, yanking him up with force. He walked Max over to the door and tossed him, sending him face first onto the stone pathway. Max regained his stance after a moment and looked back at him with a menacing expression.

"You can have her," Max said as he wiped the blood from his busted lip and stumbled back towards the house.

The man turned around to face me. "You okay?" He asked.

I nodded and attempted to stand. Once on my feet I felt myself start to waver as the floor seemed to rise up towards me. Strong hands grasped my shoulders just as my knees gave way.

"Let me carry you." He insisted, wrapping one arm around me and placing the other behind my knees and, in one quick motion, I was in his arms being held against his chest. We made our way out of the guest house, down the pathway and towards the

row of cars. I rested my head against his shoulder and closed my eyes. He must be very strong to be able to carry me without even seeming to get tired. A combination of what smelled like oak and aftershave filled my nose. I inhaled deeply, rather enjoying his scent as my mind drifted.

We reached the driveway and he paused to ask, "Do you have a car here?"

I opened my eyes at the feel of the vibration and the richness of his voice as it resonated through his chest. I shook my head which was a bad idea. It felt like everything was spinning around me and I became nauseated. "We'll just have to take mine. Where do you live?"

"Ridge Oak," I whispered, "Nelson Avenue."

"What do you say we get you home?" He carefully balanced me in his arms as he continued down the drive. I took a slow breath trying to ease the sensation that I was about to vomit all over my knight in shining armor.

As we walked towards a long row of parked cars he looked down at me. "I'm Greyson by the way." He flashed a half smile at me and I noticed for the first time how amazingly handsome he was with those gorgeous deep blue eyes like the sky right before a storm. He had more defined features, unlike Max who still had a child-like look about him. We approached a sleek, black Audi A7 and Greyson put me down. I leaned against the car as he fished a pair of keys from his pocket and hit the button, the *beep beep* signaling that the doors were unlocked. Opening

the passenger door he took my hand and guided me into the seat. He shut the door once I was inside and walked over to the driver's side. Greyson got in and started the car, turning the AC on full blast.

"There, that should help." He said.

I leaned my head back against the headrest and looked up at him. "I'm Kira." I said to him in a daze.

He glanced over at me and smiled. Putting the car in drive he gingerly pulled out of his spot, down the driveway and started the journey towards home.

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"How did you know we were in there?" I asked as we pulled into my apartment complex. He parked in front of the building I pointed to and turned the car off.

"I was standing in the kitchen and saw you pass by and leave out the back door. I looked out the window and he was leading you towards the guest house. I figured with the way you looked, stumbling around and kind of out of it, I should probably go and make sure you were okay." He explained. "Who was that guy, anyway?"

"My boyfriend... my *ex* boyfriend." I corrected myself. "What were you doing at the party? Were you there with someone?" I asked.

He seemed to hesitate for a moment. "Not exactly," he said. "I was meeting someone there."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to ruin your night."

He laughed. "Don't worry, it wasn't that kind of someone."

"Oh," I said feeling confused, my head aching.

"I'll help you inside. The drug will take a while to be completely out of your system." He said, changing the subject.

"The drug?" I asked even more puzzled.

"By what I can tell, looks like he slipped some sort of mild sedative into your drink. Doesn't appear like you took very much though." He said calmly.

"That explains a lot." I wasn't sure what I should be more angry about: the fact that Max tried to force himself on me, or that he drugged me and was planning this the whole time.

Greyson got out of the car and made his way over to the passenger side. He opened the door and held out his hand for me and I took it gratefully. In the light of the street lamp I could see that he was wearing dark jeans and a black plain shirt that contrasted with his light brown hair. He wrapped an arm around my shoulders as we made our way up to the front door of the apartment.

"Shit!" I said.

"What is it?" He asked.

"I must have left my clutch back in the guest house."

"It's ok. I can drive you back to get it." He said as he began to turn around back to the car.

"No, it's ok. I have a spare key. I'll just have to go back tomorrow and get it." I stepped off the sidewalk and crouched next to the potted flower by the door, producing a single spare key (thankful that I had put it there last month for my mom when she

needed to do laundry throughout the day at my place while she was waiting on her new washer to arrive).

I unlocked the door and stepped inside. I looked behind me, noticing that Greyson was no longer next to me. He was standing exactly where he had been, about a foot or two back on the sidewalk.

"You can come in for a bit if you want." I said to him, not sure what I expected of him or even why I invited him inside in the first place. The words just seemed to sail out of me, unable to pull them back in.

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea after what happened tonight. And you are still feeling the effects of the sedative." He replied.

"So you're saying that if this was under different circumstances you would come in?" I asked curiously.

He laughed uneasily, running his hand through his untidy hair. "Listen, I think you're really pretty and you look really nice in that dress," he said and I felt myself flush, "but I don't want to give you the wrong impression about me. And besides, I've got some stuff that I need to do."

"You've got 'stuff' to do at..." I paused, looking at the clock on the wall in the living room, "11:30 at night?"

"Yeah, I suppose I do. I'll see you around. Get some rest." Greyson said before walking back to his car.

I watched as he got into his car and reversed out of the parking spot. Once he was out of sight, I closed the door behind me. Standing there in the entry way



I felt my body humming. It was more than likely from whatever drug Max slipped me, but I preferred to believe it was from the encounter with my savior. I could only hope that the universe would see fit to let us cross paths again. With any luck it would be on better terms.

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