



**BLOOD LIKE**

# **POISON**

FOR THE LOVE OF A VAMPIRE

**M. LEIGHTON**

BLOOD LIKE POISON:  
For the Love of a Vampire

by

M. Leighton

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*The murmur of death, a dark shadow overcast,  
Ringing long and eternal as life slips slowly past,  
It breeds the unthinkable and touts the unknown,  
It begins at the end, on a whisper, a moan.*

## PROLOGUE

Bo was on his knees in the center of the concrete floor, kneeling on a black towel. He was shirtless and covered in blood spatter. Under the slimy red sheen, I could see a sickly greenish black color seeping across his chest, radiating from the left side outward. It was darkest over his heart and it pulsed as if gangrenous death was being pumped throughout his body with every slow squeeze of the muscle. That, however, was not the most alarming part. The thing that caught and held my attention was his face.

As always, when I thought of Bo, my heart clenched painfully. I remember seeing him that day, the horror of it and how terrified I was. But even now, I can't bring myself to regret stumbling upon him like that. I might've gone through the rest of my days in a selfishly numb state of hiding if I hadn't met him, hadn't known him for who and what he was. He taught me so much about a world I didn't know existed and so much more about a life I hadn't been living.

He taught me to stand up for what I believe in, to shout it out at the top of my lungs. He taught me to feel—the deep, gut-wrenching, heartbreaking, soul-singing kind of emotion I had avoided for so long. He taught me about the importance of life. He taught me about the beauty of death. He also taught me about love.

This is our story.

## CHAPTER ONE

Drums blared from the radio, but even over the loud music, I could still hear Izzy's bell-like voice as she sang along. She knew every word to the song. She bobbed her head and wiggled her shoulders, tapping her thumbs rhythmically on the steering wheel.

Her dark auburn hair was pulled back in a French twist at the back of her head and the dashboard lights illuminated her heart-shaped face, making her silvery blue eyes look even paler. Her cheeks were a little fuller than usual and her skin had an uncharacteristic glow.

I wondered about her weight gain, had my suspicions, but I said nothing. If she had something to tell me, she'd get to it in her own sweet time. That was Izzy's way.

She slid me a sidelong glance. "What are you staring at, Perv?"

"Those man hands," I replied teasingly. "You could palm a grown man's head with those mitts."

"Hey," she said, glaring at me. "Do you want to walk home?"

"Yeah, like—"

And then, as I'd done hundreds of times in the last three years, I awoke in a cold sweat. Heart racing, chest aching, I lay in bed and struggled to catch my breath. I squeezed my eyes shut against the last few seconds of the car crash, but that didn't stop me from seeing it. It never did. The awful crunch of metal rang in my ears and I knew what was coming after that—the same images that always did, the ones that only got more confusing with time.

Memories of a deer and a boy tangled together in my mind. I'd told the authorities of a person I'd seen as the car spun off the road, about the pale face of a stranger that had flashed in front of the headlights just before my recollection went blank.

I assumed we'd hit him, but they'd found no body, no evidence of blood or tissue on the blackened remains of the front bumper. They'd assured me that no one could've survived being struck by a car going over fifty miles per hour. They'd concluded that, since they hadn't found a body, the boy must've been a figment of my imagination, born of terror and trauma.

But I wasn't convinced, and after three long years, I hadn't forgotten him either. Though the details of his face had faded over time, there was something about his eyes—a soul-deep agony, a burning self-loathing—that I'd never been able to get out of my head. It had stayed with me since that night. I was drawn to that kind of suffering, almost like a kindred spirit.

Slowly but surely, as I stared at the ceiling, reality returned, settling over me like a blanket of blandness. The television played the early morning news reports, as it did every morning.

I was probably the most well-informed kid in school, mostly because I went to sleep every night with the television on and woke up every day listening to the most recent happenings as they echoed through my room.

I listened with half an ear to the Channel Six anchorman as he talked about the top story.

*“Another body was found late last night in Arlisle Preserve, near the area police have dubbed the ‘Slayer’s Slaughterhouse’.” The body was positively identified as seventeen year old Jolene Turner of Falls Town. At this time, police are not able to divulge all the details surrounding her death, though they did confirm that she was killed in a manner typical of the Southmoore Slayer, including the animal attack-like markings on the neck, a fatal chest wound and exsanguination. Turner makes victim number twenty-seven of the Southmoore Slayer and, unless he’s captured, police fear that her death will not be the last.*

*Southmoore Chief of Police Edwin McDonnough has teamed with local authorities from four neighboring towns to form a task force dedicated to the identification and apprehension of the Slayer. Law enforcement officials from Harker, Columbia, Camden, and Sumter have devoted at least one officer to the team in hopes of bringing the Slayer to justice before the violence spreads across the borders into their townships.*

*In other top news, The Center for Disease Control in Atlanta still has not been able to confirm that the mysterious illness plaguing now thirty-one Southmoore residents is Mad Cow Disease. Authorities have yet to lift the quarantine that has been imposed on the sale of local cattle...”*

I let the reporter’s voice fade into the background as my breathing returned to normal and then, with a sigh, I smacked blindly at the television’s remote control until I found the power button. Without the noise of the TV, an uncomfortable silence filled my bedroom. It was the kind of quiet that always led to troubling thoughts. It was the kind of quiet I avoided like the plague. Already, my mind was wandering back to the dream.

With another sigh, I rolled over and turned off my alarm clock, even though it had yet to buzz. I knew from years of experience that I wouldn’t find sleep again. Resigned, I threw back the covers, got out of bed and went to take a shower.

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I shouted at the tiny, dark-skinned blonde at the top of the pyramid. “Trinity, you’re wobbling!”

“I can’t help it. Aisha’s moving. If I fall off, I’m gonna kick her- ahh!”

And just like that, the pyramid came tumbling down. Actually, it was more like a gentle folding, thank God. But I knew that just because no one was hurt this time didn’t mean it wouldn’t end badly next time.

“Aisha, I’m switching you to the shoulder stand on the end.”

“Thank God,” she muttered, angrily flipping her long, intricately braided hair.

Ignoring her, I directed my attention to the slightly stocky brunette with the pigtails at the other end of the formation. “Carly, can you help hold Trinity for the center?”

With a snort and a roll of her eyes, Carly agreed, albeit ungraciously. “I guess,” she said weakly.

We looked at each other expectantly—me waiting for her to move and her waiting for...I don’t know what *she* was waiting for, but it was obvious Carly had no intention of moving whatsoever.

Carly was my whiner. I wanted to slap her. I wanted to slap her *a lot*. Seriously, I did, just not as badly (or as often) as I wanted to punch Trinity. And I

mean really punch her. Hard. Right in her pouty mouth. Trinity was the type of personality that would've brought Gandhi himself to violence.

I was rarely ever surprised by the behavior of the other cheerleaders, only irritated by it. After all, I understood them better than anyone. Until three years ago, I was fundamentally the same as them—shamefully selfish, vapid, useless and vicious. But when tragedy strikes, it leaves no part of your life, of your being, untouched, unscathed, unscarred. No, tragedy had carved a whole new person out of my less-than-ideal former self, and in a way, I'm thankful for it.

Now my eyes are open and I'm content, at least for my soul's sake, to be growing more and more different, growing further and further apart from them. It does make things more difficult, though. Much more difficult.

Pushing both the violent and the troubling thoughts from my mind, I simply smiled sweetly and asked Carly, "Then how about getting over there so we can try it?"

With a loud, exaggerated sigh, Carly obliged me by moving toward the other end of the line.

"Ridley, you better not get me killed," Trinity said theatrically as she followed Carly into position.

"Don't be so dramatic, Trinity. Just keep your balance and you'll be fine."

"I don't see you up here, risking your life for a pyramid, Moby Dick," Trinity mumbled under her breath.

Her comment was point in case. Trinity was convinced that anyone who wore a size greater than a four was a cow. Or a whale in this case. She was unbelievable.

Though the barb rankled, I ignored her. As always. She assumed that I didn't hear her, but she couldn't have been more wrong. I simply disregarded her remarks because anything less than that was like pouring gasoline on a fire. If her nastiness was given the tiniest bit of attention or credence, she just acted out all the more.

So, as I'd done a thousand times before, I swallowed my anger and my retorts, opting for a future at Stanford instead. My college dreams, my *life's* dreams were riding on a scholarship and Trinity was a great flyer for the squad, just another reason not to rock the boat.

My biggest goal was to keep my nose clean until graduation. The end. And if that included ignoring Trinity so as not to get her too riled up, then so be it.

"Alright, let's see it from the ground up with the music," I shouted, hitting the play button on my iPod's docking station.

Usher blared from the speakers and the cheerleaders began to move in time with the beat. Steadily, they climbed and built the pyramid until Trinity was once more perched on top, a foot in each of two girls' palms. Then, right on cue, they lifted her until she was standing high in the air, atop their extended arms.

"Perfect," I said, clapping excitedly. "Now we can work that new toss in from right there." I approached the girls as they dismounted. "Let's take five and then we'll work on flying for the rest of the afternoon."

Shorts-clad cheerleaders disbursed to the bleachers to get sips of their bottled waters and complain about what a slave driver I was. Same drill, different day.

After a couple of minutes, I heard Trinity say, "Stalk much?"

A few seconds after that, several of the others chimed in.

"Hell-o, Sexy!"

“He can stalk me any time.”

“That’s just creepy.”

“He looks weird. And dangerous.”

I looked up to see who was causing such a commotion. All the girls were looking back toward the fence that surrounded the practice field. Curious, I turned in that direction, too.

The setting sun was right in my eyes, but if I squinted, I could see a guy in a black hoodie, standing at the fence. Since I hadn’t seen him around school before, I could only assume that he was new. He was leaning against the metal chain link, one arm draped casually across its top, watching us as if we were shiny new things that puzzled him.

I held my hand up to my eyes, shielding them from the bright light so that I could get a better look at him. When I met his eyes, I realized that he wasn’t watching *us*; he was watching *me*.

“Got a new admirer, huh Ridley?” Carly liked to tease. Carly also liked to spread rumors.

“And you’ve got a great imagination, Carly,” I said lightly, not wanting to make a big deal of it. I was dead set against my name being bandied about in typical cheerleader fashion so I made sure to give her as little ammunition as possible.

A masculine voice interrupted our rude staring.

“Hey, T!”

It came from somewhere behind me. I recognized the voice of course, but even if I hadn’t, I still would’ve known who was hailing me. It was Drew. For some unknown, inexplicable reason, when he didn’t call me Ridley (which was most of the time), he called me “T”.

Some of the cheerleaders gossiped that it stood for “tease” because I didn’t put out, but I doubted Drew was that crude. If I really thought he was, I wouldn’t be with him.

Reluctantly, I turned from the stranger to find Drew. He was coming across the field, decked out in his football pads, looking attractively sweaty and mussed.

“Hey, babe, can you get a ride home with Trinity or Summer today? Josh wants me to go with him to pick up some parts for the Mustang after practice,” Drew explained.

“I’ll just walk,” I said, swallowing my frustrated sigh. “No biggee.”

That was the one bad thing about letting Drew drive me to school. If he changed his plans, I got screwed. Luckily, I didn’t live far and I never minded walking when the weather was nice. It was like a mini vacation.

“You sure?”

“Yep.” I nodded to further reassure him and reinforce my answer.

“You’re so awesome,” he said, winding one arm around my waist to pick me up and smash his lips playfully to mine.

“I am?” Even as I so coyly—teasingly—asked the question, I thought of my nickname, “T”. Maybe the girls were right. I couldn’t help the frown that accompanied the thought.

Setting me back on my feet, Drew just grinned mischievously and shrugged. “That’s what they say,” he taunted as he turned and jogged back across the field to his

own practice.

Turning back toward the bleachers, I wiped the frown from my forehead and forced my mind to return to the task at hand. "Alright, let's get this toss down."

Grumbling and complaining, the girls reluctantly descended the stands. I watched in wonder as they dragged themselves to the field. It was probably a mystery to almost everyone how such a motley crew managed to make it so far in competitions. We didn't look very dedicated or energetic.

As the last of the girls walked past me, heading back out onto the grass, I couldn't stop my eyes from flickering back to the fence. I was curiously hungry for one more peek at the stranger. He was still standing there, too. He just stared at me, as motionless as a statue.

Though he was backlit by the setting sun, I could see his eyes clearly. They were a dark, rich brown that seemed almost black in his pale, pale face. The spark of interest shone in their depths, but beyond that, there was something else. Danger? Determination? Sadness? Fear? Satisfaction? Was it him, or was I simply seeing a reflection of my own inner demons? After all, I'd always wanted but never found someone with whom I could share the real Ridley. Was I imagining that I saw such a person in the face of the stranger? I couldn't be sure what it was, but something in those eyes felt strangely familiar.

The longer he held my eyes, the more I felt like he was touching me in some way, almost physically, tangibly. Much to my surprise, my belly did a little flip, excitement dancing along my nerve ends.

We watched each other for a second or two longer and then, dismissively, he turned and walked away.

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Later that evening, Summer and I sat cross-legged on my bed, making flash cards for our Anatomy and Physiology test. We were both taking college preparatory classes and Mr. Richardson, our A&P teacher, gave us only four grades in the whole year. We had two major tests, a mid-term exam and a final exam. If you bombed any of the four, you really didn't have a snowball's chance in Hell of fully recovering your grade.

Summer was probably my best friend, though that didn't mean as much as it used to. Much as had happened with almost everyone else, I'd grown apart from her over the last three years. But still, she was the lesser of the evils as far as friends went. I mean, confiding in Trinity was completely out of the question. Having her as my best friend would be like keeping a pet barracuda in my bathtub.

"If I tell you something, will you promise not to tell?" Summer didn't look up at me, just kept writing on the back of the card marked *Alveoli*.

"Of course."

"Trinity wants me to help her get revenge on Devon. Well, sort of."

Devon was Trinity's ex. If she had anything close to a weakness, he'd be her Achilles heel.

I put down my marker. I could sense a storm on the horizon, a nasty plan birthed in the sick mind of Trinity and it deserved my full attention. They didn't call her *The Unholy Trinity* behind her back for nothing.

"By doing what?"

“She wants me to get Devon to take me out and then post on Facebook that he’s really, really tiny so that no one else will want to go out with him.”

“Ahh,” I said, immediately understanding her end game in such a plot. “Then Trinity will be the only one gracious enough to date him despite the vicious rumors.”

Summer shrugged. “I guess.” She still hadn’t looked up to meet my eyes.

“Summer, you’re not considering this, are you?”

She shrugged again.

“But why? Why would you do that? To Devon or to yourself?”

She looked up at me, frowning. “Oh, I wouldn’t actually have sex with him. I’d just tell people that we did.”

“But everyone would think that you just went out and slept with him. Do you think they won’t be calling you a slut by lunchtime if you do this?”

“You know how Trinity is. If I say no, it’s hard to tell what she’ll do to me.”

I growled, sliding off the bed to pace the floor. Everyone was afraid of Trinity, afraid of what she would do if she was angered. Trinity was smart, though. She never pushed the wrong people. She always picked the weakest ones of the herd to do her dirty work. She would never ask me to do something like that. I might bite my tongue a lot, but she knew I wouldn’t go along with something so deplorable. It was times like this that made me wonder if Stanford was really worth it.

“Summer, you can’t do this.”

“I have to,” she said miserably.

I paced the floor, thinking. I stopped when a possible solution occurred to me. “Devon’s a nice guy. Let me talk to him. If he refuses to take you out, problem solved, right?”

Summer’s eyes lit up and she clapped excitedly. Though this disaster was averted, I knew it was just a matter of time before Trinity thought of something else, some other despicable way to win Devon back.

I called Devon and, as I suspected, he was more than willing to go along with our counter-Trinity plan and keep it hush-hush.

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The next morning, I decided to drive to school. There was an away game that night and I didn’t want to get stuck riding home with somebody else when the bus dropped us back off at school. Since I could never count on one of my rogue parents to be a reliable back-up plan, I tried always to make other arrangements—me. As usual, I was my own plan B.

I pulled my old Civic into a parking spot and grabbed my duffel from the back seat. I had to hurry. I was running late.

I scurried into Home Room and scooted into my seat, dropping my bag quietly onto the floor. Mrs. Dingle was going over the local news, as she did every morning. She felt it was her duty to keep us informed of what was going on around us, as if we were all so oblivious we wouldn’t find out otherwise. But then I realized something. She was probably right. The only reason I knew what was going on was because I went to sleep with the television on. I couldn’t tolerate silence. Or, better yet, I couldn’t tolerate the places my mind went in the silence. Either way, I heard the news whether I wanted to or not.

The first tidbit she force-fed us was the increase in the number of animal

deaths. Farm animals were being mauled and brutally killed all over the area. The Wildlife Officers had neither confirmed nor denied speculation that there might be a pack of wolves or even a mountain lion terrorizing livestock in the region. As an avid animal lover, topics like that disturbed me, even more than those involving the Slayer, which was what Mrs. Dingle moved on to next.

Southmoore was a thriving city that lay just north of our small South Carolina town, Harker. For that reason, citizens and reporters alike had all been closely following the killings there. As a community, we hadn't been put on lockdown yet, but if things got much worse up north or, heaven forbid, moved down south to us, our freedoms would be quickly and severely curtailed.

As she droned on, I let my mind wander. For some reason, it meandered straight down a path that led to the guy I'd seen at the field the day before. I could picture his face with perfect clarity, as I'd done countless times since yesterday. There was just something about those eyes.

Just then, as if a light tap had sounded on the inside of my skull, I looked up. There, standing in front of the lockers outside my classroom, was the object of my ruminations. He had obviously been walking somewhere. He had stopped, mid-stride, right in front of my Home Room door. He just stood there, staring at me with those hauntingly dark pools of chocolate.

I was immediately captivated. Looking into his eyes was like standing at the edge of a deep pond and gazing down into swirling, hypnotic waters, becoming mesmerized by them, trapped in them. I felt as if I couldn't look away, not even if I had wanted to.

I have no idea how long we stared at each other that way, but when the bell rang, I jumped, blinking and looking around guiltily. When I looked back out into the hall, I was deflated to see only a row of gray lockers. There was no intriguing stranger standing in front of them anymore. He was gone.

I hopped up out of my desk and hurried to the hall, hoping to catch another glimpse of him, but I wasn't fast enough. Floods of bustling bodies were already pouring out of all the classrooms. I scanned the sea of faces, but among them, I didn't see the pale face for which I was searching.

Inordinately disappointed, I slowly made my way down the hall to my locker. I couldn't help but ask myself why I was so interested in him, why it mattered where he went, why I cared.

With no answers rising to the surface, I put my duffel away and put books into my messenger bag to carry to class. I tried to convince myself that it was just curiosity that made him so noteworthy—normal, healthy curiosity—but in the back of my mind, I kept seeing his eyes. There was just something about those eyes.

The rest of the morning was nothing short of excruciating. The minutes of each class seemed to tick by at a snail's pace. I caught myself watching the hallways more than the teacher and, between classes, watching every face that I passed, looking for a pair of compelling black-brown eyes. I never did find them, though, and the whole hide-and-seek thing just left me frustrated to the point of a headache.

Lunch was something of a reprieve, thank goodness, but only because I was surrounded by people who required an incredible amount of focus and attentiveness from everyone else around them. They were like solar panels and attention was like

the sun. They absorbed it, absorbed us, and trust me, it's not easy being the sun.

At our table on the covered concrete patio just outside the cafeteria, Drew sat on one side of me and Summer sat on the other.

I saw Trinity lean around Summer to address me. "Are you and Drew going to Caster's party this weekend?"

The way she was eyeing me said she'd had to repeat herself, something Trinity found intolerable. There were few things that got under her skin more quickly than being ignored. I didn't do it on purpose, of course. I was just preoccupied. But I knew that in a thousand years, Trinity would never understand how anything could be more interesting than our group discussions at lunchtime. She didn't ask what I was thinking about and I didn't volunteer.

"Caster's party," she snapped.

"Oh, sorry," I said.

Trinity always gave the final say on social events, like what the group was doing, when we were doing it and who we were doing it with. She was like the popularity godmother. When she tapped her wand on a particular person or activity, it took on a life of its own. With her approval, the sky was the limit, a reputation could soar into the limelight. But with her disapproval, she could squash a person's spirit under her heel like it was nothing more than a bothersome ant.

If I weren't the captain of the cheer squad who happened to be dating the quarterback of the football team, she wouldn't have given my input a second thought. But I was both of those coveted things, and it was my status—and my status *alone*—that prompted her to care what my plans were. Besides, she knew that my plans would likely include Drew, which in turn would likely include Devon.

*One more year, one more year, one more year*, I reminded myself, sick to death of all the high school games and drama.

"I don't know," I answered, turning to Drew. "Drew?"

"What?" He hadn't been paying us the least bit of attention.

"Caster's party. Wanna go?"

"Maybe," he shrugged.

I turned back to Trinity. "Maybe."

Her expression showed frustration and I knew she was reaching her patience threshold.

"How am I supposed to make plans if you two won't make up your mind?"

"Go if you want to go. We're not stopping you," I reminded her casually.

It was like poking a bear and I knew it. I suppose it was my passive-aggressive way of lashing out. Whatever. It felt good.

Trinity growled in response. She didn't need to say it, but we were both thinking to ourselves that *that* would never happen. She turned to pass what she'd learned down the lunch table and I could almost see the indecision spreading across faces like wildfire. No one's plans would be concrete until Trinity gave the go-ahead that we were all going to Caster's party.

I sighed and thought again how I couldn't wait for high school to be over.

I didn't let my exasperation show, however. I'd long since discovered how to live inside the shark tank without getting eaten or becoming a shark: never let 'em see you sweat. Don't show any emotion, no matter how many you're feeling. It just

reveals your weaknesses and, to them, weaknesses are like blood in the water.

I try never to let them see me get angry, upset, defensive, flustered, uncertain, *anything*. I'm sure that, to them, I seem somewhat robotic, but it keeps *me* out of trouble and keeps *them* at arm's length. And that's how I survive.

Spearing a cucumber with my fork, I nibbled its crisp edges while I listened with half an ear to what was being said all around me.

Drew and Devon were talking to Josh about how to get more horsepower under the hood of the Mustang they were working on. Trinity was whispering to April and Aisha so quietly I couldn't hear her, which invariably meant she was talking about me (Trinity was rarely ever so quiet). Summer was regaling Carly and Shana with her personal success stories of pairing ankle-high boots with a skirt. Chace and Minty were arguing over which freshman at the table next to ours had the nicer rack.

All their talk jumbled in my head as my mind strayed once more to a pair of the most intense eyes I've ever seen. I was both intrigued by my unusual reaction to him and aggravated by it. I mean, it's not like he's Damon Salvatore hot or Keith Stone smooth. But regardless, he'd certainly managed to work his way into my head with absolutely no effort on his part whatsoever.

What's worse is that I have a boyfriend. I shouldn't even be giving him a second glance, much less thinking about him so much, and yet I just couldn't seem to escape those eyes.

Shaking off thoughts of him—again—I looked out across the campus. As if they were drawn by some invisible magnetic force of nature, my eyes collided with the very ones I was trying to forget.

There he was, sitting beneath a tree all the way on the other side of the green expanse of grass behind the school, and just like before, he was simply staring at me.

I shouldn't say "simply." There was nothing simple about the shower of chills that rained down my back and arms. There was nothing simple about the flutter in my chest that made me feel short of breath.

Instantly, I forgot all the reasons I was avoiding him, all the reasons I was trying not to think about him. At that moment, I just wanted to hold his gaze as long as it would hold me back.

Penetrating, unwavering and extremely unsettling, his boldness was probably wildly inappropriate, but not in a stalker way. It was bold in a good way, in an exciting way. The way he looked at me, I felt like the only girl in the world.

He didn't smile and he didn't move a single muscle. He just stared at me, like he was seeing right into my soul. I sat perfectly still and let him.

"Ohmigod, Ridley! Could you be more obvious?" Trinity's tone was a little louder and sharper than need be and it carried all the way down the table. I knew she was trying to get Drew's attention.

I jerked my eyes away from the fathomless brown ones and turned a frown on Trinity.

"Obvious? About what?" I assumed my most casually confused expression.

It was important to remain calm and appear casual no matter how *not* casual I was feeling. I hid every iota of emotion behind a carefully schooled mask of confident nonchalance. It was essential.

"Who's that?" At Drew's question, I felt like sneering. Her plan had worked

perfectly.

“Who?” I looked up questioningly. I didn’t need to ask to whom he was referring; I knew, but I did so just to prove my point: that I had no idea who they were talking about.

“That guy over there,” he said, tipping his head toward the stranger. “The one that’s about to get his teeth handed to him.”

My eyes darted back to the mesmerizing ebony ones, but I looked quickly away before I fell into their depths again. Then, with a shrug that belied how jittery I was, I said, “I don’t know.”

“Hey,” Summer said, throwing her two cents in. “That’s the guy from yesterday, the one who was totally stalking you.”

“No one’s stalking me, Summer,” I snapped. The look of shock on every face in my line of sight had me instantly regretting my impulsive display of emotion. “You watch too much *Gossip Girl*,” I added with a carefree laugh.

Faces relaxed somewhat, but I knew it wasn’t quite enough.

“So who else is going to Caster’s party?” I asked, knowing that was the only thing more interesting than me having a stalker. If I didn’t nip it in the bud, something like that would be fodder for the gossip mongers for weeks, maybe months.

Everyone but Trinity and Drew fell right into party talk, just as I’d hoped they would. Trinity was too sharp for that, though. She’s got a nose for deception. She can smell evasiveness at fifty paces. And Drew, he was a naturally jealous guy, so they were both a little harder to throw off the scent than the others. Finally, though, after a few tense seconds, my casualness won the day and they took the bait. Much to my relief, they pitched in with everyone else on the subject change.

Mentally, I sighed and tried to put lingering obsidian orbs out of my head—*tried* being the operative word.

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Chemistry: the last class of the day and by far the most boring. You’d think Chemistry would be one of the most interesting subjects and, really, it should’ve been. In this instance, the problem was the teacher. We had a mind-numbingly boring one named Mr. Dole. I pondered the incongruity of it on the way to class; anything to keep my mind off of *him*.

With a sigh, I turned in through the door, taking my usual seat at the second long black science table beneath the window. I threw my messenger bag up on the table and slouched down in my chair. I just wanted it to be over so we could go to Norton, cheer at the away game and get home. I was in no mood for extra time on my hands and that’s what I’d surely find under Mr. Dole’s tedious instruction.

In Mr. Dole’s class, no one sat at the front two tables in the room. It was a well known fact that they were semi-dangerous. Mr. Dole spit a lot when he talked and it was nothing to get sprayed in the eye or, heaven forbid, in the mouth if it happened to be open. We all kept a good distance whenever possible. One of our best defensive measures was boycotting the first two tables.

Today, however, there was a black messenger bag lying atop the table to the right and in front of mine, at one of the off-limits tables. I looked at it curiously then put my head down on my crossed arms. My temples were throbbing.

I heard Mr. Dole slam his book down on his desk, just like he did every day, and

I raised my head attentively. My expression was immediately one of interest, or so it would seem to the casual observer. I could fake it with the best of 'em.

My pretense was soon to be genuine, however, when I spotted a familiar dark head directly in front of Mr. Dole. It caught my attention so quickly and held it so completely it might as well have been a flashing neon sign.

He didn't have to turn around for me to recognize the stylishly disheveled practically-black hair. Or the charcoal hoodie. I'd have spotted it anywhere, probably even at a store that sold black hoodies. It drew me like gravity. *He* drew me like gravity.

The material was stretched taut over broad shoulders as he leaned forward on his elbows. It hugged his back all the way down to his trim waist and narrow hips. My eyes were lingering on the way his jeans strained over his butt when I saw his head turn.

Our eyes met and, for an instant, I wondered if he could feel me looking at him. But then, just like before, I fell into the sparkling onyx and was lost to the world.

In them, I thought I could see a thousand emotions, all twirling restlessly in the dark. Some of them were painful, some bewitching, some haunting. All of them were thrilling.

Mr. Dole's voice penetrated my thrall.

"Class, let's give a warm welcome to Mr. Jonathan Bowman. He's a transfer from Southmoore," Mr. Dole said in his bland monotone.

The new guy turned to Mr. Dole and I heard a husky rumble, but couldn't make out the words. Mr. Dole quickly assuaged my curiosity, however, when he announced, "And he goes by Bo."

"I hope he's not the Southmoore Slayer," Troy Dennison said from the back of the room.

Troy was a snot and, though I think he just couldn't help himself, it didn't make it any easier to tolerate him. I usually just ignored him, but for some reason, his making fun of the new guy, Bo, made me angry.

Everyone snickered. Tight-lipped, I wanted to make a comment, but, as per my usual, I refrained. Nevertheless, I felt stirrings of strong emotion bubbling just beneath the surface.

I tossed a withering look over my shoulder at Troy and when he saw it, he stopped smiling and muttered a quick "sorry", casting his eyes down at his book.

When I looked back toward the front of the room, Bo was watching me and I smiled uncomfortably. He looked at me for a moment longer, straight-faced and serious, and then turned his attention to Mr. Dole who was ready to begin the lesson.

I got absolutely nothing out of class, although I could hardly have called it boring today. I was on pins and needles the entire hour. Though he didn't make eye contact with me again that period, I saw Bo turn his head numerous times, as if glancing at me via his peripheral vision. My heart stopped each time he did it, thinking he might turn all the way around and look at me, let me melt into those striking eyes. But he never did. He just teased me.

When the bell rang, I was usually the first one out the door. Today, however, I dawdled as much as possible. I watched Bo from beneath my lashes and he didn't seem to be in any hurry either. I matched my pace with his, wondering if he was

waiting to talk to me, hoping that he was.

I got the feeling by watching him that he never hurried, that very little bothered him or ruffled his feathers. I don't know what would make me think that, but I was almost certain of it. He carried himself with a languid ease that said he had all the time in the world, and therefore felt no need to rush.

With my books secured in my messenger bag and nothing left to linger over, I made my way to the front of the class and walked in front of the Bo's table, heading for the door.

I didn't look his way. I thought for sure he'd say something, *anything*, as I passed. I mean, he had been watching me an awful lot. But he didn't say a word. I thought I saw his head come up briefly when I walked by, but otherwise he didn't move.

I hesitated at the door for a heartbeat, giving Bo one last chance to say something, but he didn't. So I left.

At my locker, I threw my books inside and took out my duffel then slammed the thin metal door shut. I was feeling prickly and irritable and, though I was loath to admit it, it had everything to do with Bo.

I was really disappointed that he had turned out to be such a dud. I mean, he didn't speak to me, didn't even acknowledge me, like he hadn't been watching me like a hawk for two days. What's up with that?

Determined not to think about him any more, I sought out Trinity and Aisha and we made our way to the bus. We had a long trip ahead of us.

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Several annoying hours later, the bus was pulling back into the lot at the school. Maintaining my usual ambivalence had been a true test of my resolve. I felt itchy all night and had to make a concerted effort not to snap at anybody or let on that I was out of sorts. I knew that if I did, the inevitable questions would follow and that would've been a disaster.

So, I smiled and cheered happily, all the while seething inside. I messed up three different cheers. After the third one, it wasn't difficult to conclude that I needed to stop thinking about Bo and his eyes. It was becoming glaringly obvious that he was not doing my life any favors.

On the way home, it seemed I was constantly pushing thoughts of him out of my mind. The problem wasn't in getting him out; it was in keeping him out. He just wouldn't stay gone, at least not for very long anyway.

I knew that I needed to be persistent, however, to resist thinking about him. It's what needed to be done, so I told myself that's what I'd do. Simple as that. The funny thing is that, at the time, I thought it would be easy. Turns out resisting Bo was anything but easy.

"Ridley, you need a ride?" Trinity was calling to me from the rear of the bus. We were back at school, unloading people and equipment into the parking lot.

"No, thanks. I drove. I'll just see you tomorrow night," I replied, lugging my duffel to my car way out at the end of the lot.

"T," Drew hollered from behind me. I stopped and waited for him to catch up. "Why don't you leave your car and I'll take you home tonight. I can bring you back over tomorrow before the party to get it," he suggested.

“My mom will worry if she doesn’t see my car in the driveway.”

“You can call her when you get home,” he said. He stepped closer to me and rubbed my arm suggestively. “We can take a detour on the way to your house.”

I looked up at Drew, at the wholesome, handsome face of the most popular guy in school, and for the life of me I couldn’t remember why I liked him. I mean, he’s occasionally funny, fairly smart, sporadically thoughtful and he used to turn me on, but now it seemed that whatever was between us was just gone.

Unbidden, luminous coffee-colored eyes drifted through my mind. Angrily, I swept them aside. Again.

“No. I’m tired. I’m going home. I’ve got plans in the morning anyway,” I fibbed.

He sighed deeply and gave in. “Alright. So I’ll pick you up for Caster’s party tomorrow night?”

I briefly considered making up some excuse, but I knew that would sound suspicious. I’d wait and see how I felt tomorrow. Maybe I was just having an off day. Maybe the demise of our relationship wasn’t really as imminent as it felt.

Come tomorrow night, though, if I still felt the same way, I’d have to have a talk with Drew. At least he’d be loose and happy after a party and a few beers. It might actually work out better that way. Maybe he’d take the news a little more gracefully.

Though I already dreaded the fallout, I felt like there was no sense in pretending that I liked Drew when I didn’t. I wouldn’t string him along; it wasn’t right. Unlike some of the other girls, I wasn’t so obsessed with being popular that I would date a guy I’m not even interested in just because he has great social standing.

Drew prompted me. “T?”

He looked irritated that he’d been forced to bring me back to the present when I’d drifted off into my own thoughts.

“Sorry. Uh, yeah. Pick me up at nine?”

“Good deal,” he said, taking me into his arms to kiss me goodnight.

I could tell by his effort that he was trying to get me to change my mind, but it was so not working! In fact, I could hardly wait for it to be over. What’s worse is that I don’t think he even knew that I wasn’t into it.

“See you tomorrow night,” he said and then turned to walk back down to the front of the lot where he’d parked.

I proceeded on to my car, unlocked the door and slid my bag inside before dropping my tense body into the driver’s seat. I pulled the door shut, leaned my head back and just sat there for a few minutes, thinking about the strange details of my day. I really did feel out of sorts. Even when I tried to describe it in my own mind, that was the most accurate label I could come up with: out of sorts.

I listened to the sounds of my friends’ voices as they giggled and whooped, making their plans and saying their goodbyes. I felt sure that many of them would gather at Trinity’s house later for a small party. But tonight, I just wasn’t in the mood to be a joiner.

When all the lights had faded and my car was the only one left in the parking lot other than the empty bus, I leaned forward to start the engine. Only it didn’t start.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I growled into the silence.

I turned the key again and pushed on the gas pedal, but it only made a tired whirring sound. The dash lights were noticeably dim and when I turned on the headlights, they barely dented the darkness in front of the car.

While I'm no mechanic, I have enough sense to know when the battery's dead. And that battery was dead.

I shouted out in frustration. "Crap!"

*Options, options, options*, I thought to myself, hating to call Drew, but unable to readily think of another choice. After all, I was my own plan B.

I stared out into the night, racking my brain for a person to call that could help me. I doubted Trinity even *had* jumper cables and most of the other girls probably didn't even know what they were. Mom was out, as usual, and Dad was gone, as usual. That left me. And since I wasn't much help to myself at this particular juncture, I was left with Drew.

Frustrated yet resigned, I looked up and out into the night as I rooted around in the console for my cell phone. It startled me when I caught a hint of movement in the gloom. My heart picked up the pace, pounding in my chest like the hoof beats of herd of wild Mustangs. Frantically, I searched blindly for my cell phone, afraid to take my eyes off the windshield for even one second.

A disembodied hoodie materialized in front of my dim headlights and my runaway heart jumped up into my throat. But just before panic could officially set in, I saw a hauntingly familiar pale face come into view. Though my pulse slowed somewhat, all the excitement seemed to transfer to my stomach, where a nest of butterflies fluttered anxiously.

Some part of my brain warned me that I should be scared, that this was creepy and that I should lock my door and call for help. But it was a small part, one quickly silenced by the voice of my growing attraction. Even more bizarre than that, though, was the feeling in my gut, the feeling that said I could trust him with my life. Now *that* made no sense *at all*.

Hands resting casually in the pockets of his jacket, Bo approached my window and sank down into a squat. Obliging, I reached to lower the window. My fading battery didn't have enough juice to work the mechanism, however, so I had to open the door in order to address him.

Bo rose and shifted to the side to let me push the door wide. When it was open as far as it would go, he stepped into the V and squatted down right in front of me.

Up close at night, his eyes appeared to be endless wells of inky liquid. The low light shone on their glassy surfaces and sparkled. His hair was the rumpled mass of jagged peaks that it always was and his jaw was dark with five o'clock shadow.

He smelled wonderful, too. I could tell it wasn't cologne. He just smelled clean, like soap and something tangy, spicy.

"Need some help?"

Though his voice was not much more than a whisper, I heard him clearly. It was as if his soft words resonated somewhere deep inside me, causing a little thrill of pleasure to vibrate through my body like a tuning fork.

I could've just answered his question. I *should've* just answered his question. But I had questions of my own and they seemed far more important at that moment.

"What are you doing here?"

“Watching you,” he confessed, as if that was the most natural thing in the world, to be lurking in a dark parking lot in the middle of the night.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are you watching me?”

“Why does everyone watch you?”

“Everyone doesn’t watch me,” I rebutted.

“Yes they do.”

“No they don’t.”

“You just don’t see them watching you. But they do,” he said, his lips twisting up into what might’ve been a tiny grin. I couldn’t be sure since the shadow of the door frame fell across part of his face.

“But why? Why would anyone watch *me*?”

“Come on. You have to know how beautiful you are. You don’t need me to tell you that,” he said, making it sound as if I was fishing for compliments.

“I guess that’s just your opinion,” I responded sharply.

He eyed me suspiciously, determining whether or not I was being sincere.

“You really don’t know, do you?” He seemed genuinely surprised.

I shrugged, wishing that I could tear my gaze away from his and look anywhere but into those eyes.

“But you are,” he declared softly. “You shine like the sun and you move like water. Your eyes are the perfect mix of gray and brown, like fog in the woods, and you smell like lilacs in the summer. I think if you laughed, it would sound like music.”

If anyone else had said something like that to me, I probably would’ve smiled and written them off as either a total dork or a total nut job. But not with him, not the way he said it. He was enchanting and I was enchanted.

Even though his poetic words stirred something inside me, bringing long dead things to life, it was his eyes that told the real story. They promised that he meant everything he’d said and that he was just as intrigued by and attracted to me as I was him.

My lungs seized, trapping air inside the painfully tight walls of my chest. I didn’t know what to say. I had no such elegant prose to explain the way he made me feel when he looked at me with those hypnotic eyes. I couldn’t even really make it make sense to myself, so telling someone else was hopeless.

But I could feel it. Oh, how I could feel it.

“Your battery’s dead,” he stated flatly.

“I-I know,” I admitted.

“Let me walk you home. You can get it fixed tomorrow.” He stood, holding the door open wide.

He held out his hand and I took it. It was cool and a little rough, but attractively so. When I stood, we were less than a foot apart. The words of gratitude I’d been about to speak died on my tongue. My insides were warm and tingly and tightly focused on him, and I fell mute in the face of his nearness.

Though he was a few inches taller than my five foot six frame, he was not so tall that I would have trouble touching my lips to his. All I’d have to do is stretch up