



After her mother dies, Charlotte goes to live with her father and step-family in Europe. Charlotte quickly uncovers a fantastical country called Andeka, of which her father is a ruler. While learning about her unknown heritage, Charlotte unwittingly falls in love with her step-brother, Kaisen. As Charlotte fights for her kingdom and her family, Kaisen and Charlotte try to keep their love a secret. However, every secret, no matter how scandalous, is eventually revealed.

The Cigam Chronicles Crimson Current

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The Cigam Chronicles:

Crimson Current

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First Edition

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Chapter 1

THE SUN WAS SETTING when I finally headed home. I was probably late for dinner and mom was going to kill me when she saw me. I pulled into my neighborhood and checked my make-up for any smudges, the same thing I always did every time I headed home. Mom hates it when my make-up is smudged and dark; she says I look like a raccoon. When I looked up from the mirror I noticed smoke rising above a house on my road. Then I noticed flashing lights.

I sped up when I got to my street. I didn't realize which house was on fire until I was a few houses down from my own. My house was on fire. I immediately stopped my car on the side of the road and jumped out, leaving my purse on the seat and the keys in the ignition. My breathing accelerated and a thousand thoughts rushed through my mind. The most important question being, where is my family? Was my mom or my brother, Louis inside?

The smoke filled the street and I gasped for clean air as the smoke filled my lungs, but I just kept getting closer. I needed to find out what was happening. I could just make out the flames

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pouring from the windows on the top floor like a fierce stream. Horror struck through me like a lightning bolt as my adrenaline pumped through me, my home was completely destroyed. All my belongings and possibly my family were being burnt and charred away. As those thoughts sunk in, I started to wonder aimlessly through the thickening smoke, searching for any sign of my family. The flames from the house were blazing with pure rage. I could feel the heat against my skin intensify as I kept walking closer. The smoke was so thick and acrid I couldn't see where I was going. I staggered along the dewy grass trying to get closer to the house, not sure what I was going to do when I got there. My eyes burned from the haze. They were full of tears from the burning of the smoke and the panic that was building up inside me. The lack of oxygen soon took hold of me and I started to see things. An alien in a yellow suit and large dark mouth came at me. I tried to run past it, but it caught me in its arms and picked me up. I tried to fight it off but I was too weak. It carried me to the flashing lights of its space ship, I tried to fight back, but it was too strong. When we reached the flashing lights, the strange creature laid me down on a high table under the lights. I started to hear a familiar voice. It was Luke.

"Charlotte, thank heavens," my stepfather said as he threw his arms around me. His body trembled as he held me close. Now that I was regaining my oxygen levels, I could see clearer. The alien was a firefighter, who had taken his mask off. He had brought me to an ambulance parked across the street. I slowly sat up and pulled away from Luke. His face was red and puffy.

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"Where are mom and Louis?" I asked, my voice didn't sound the same; it was hoarse and burned like I had swallowed the fire. I wanted to cough but I knew if I did I wouldn't be able to stop and my throat would hurt worse. I held back the cough as long as I could.

"Charlotte, honey," Luke started as he took my hands in his. His voice was sad and drained. I had never heard him sound like this before. He has been my stepfather for almost seven years and I had never seen him so upset. That's when I knew I needed to ready myself for what he was about to say. "Louis was taken to the hospital in an ambulance an hour ago. I stayed behind to wait for them to find you and your mom."

"They haven't found mom yet?" I asked with some glimpse of hope. But my hope quickly dissolved as soon as I looked at Luke again. His face was red and he was crying. He was a complete mess; normally he was composed and strict. It was like seeing a different person in front of me.

"They didn't find her in time. She didn't make it Charlotte. They said she was down stairs where the fire started. Louis was upstairs; the flames had just reached him when the firefighters rescued him." He sobbed. I stopped listening when he said my mother's body was brought out. Not her, but what was left. My eyes swelled up more as I rubbed them. Chills ran down my spine as I tried to come back to reality. She can't be gone. I saw her this morning before I left for school. She made me breakfast and packed Louis's lunch. She hugged us before we left. That wasn't even twelve hours ago that I saw her alive. How can she be gone in such a short time? It didn't seem real. Then before I

could feel anymore emotions piling up on me my sadness turned to anger.

"No! NO! You're lying. She can't be gone. I'll find her." I shouted shoving away from Luke. I ran as close to the house as I could before it got too hot for me to move. "MOM! MOM!" I screamed for her. The flames built up higher with every scream of pain within me. I fell to my knees and screamed for her until I was pulled away from the emanating heat. The last thing I remember from that night was a blurry figure carrying me to my neighbor's yard and laying me down in the prickly grass. I was pretty sure it was Luke. He held and rocked me until I fell into unconsciousness.

WHEN MY EYES OPENED early the next afternoon, I was in a hospital bed. I was staring up at the ceiling when the memories of last night started to flood back in. "Mom," I tried to yell but I could barely make any noise at all. I kept trying. "Mom." I finally managed to scream, it was the most pitiful scream I have ever heard but it was successful. The person sitting in the chair, which I hadn't noticed before, started to wake up and moved to my side.

"Charlotte, honey, it's alright." The almost unfamiliar voice said. "I'll get the nurse." The man that had left me alone in my room was my father. My real father, David. He lives in Europe somewhere with his new family. I see him once a year during the week of my birthday. He sends me Christmas presents and calls me, but I don't care to talk to him much. I never really had a strong relationship with David. He has always tried to get me to come meet his wife and her two sons, but I have never wanted to. He left my mother and me when I was two and I

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have never forgiven him. He tells me he tried to get us to come with him, but my mom didn't want to go. My mom tried to tell me he left us to go run a magic kingdom, but once I grew out of that phase and realized it was a lie, I didn't want to trust him anymore. I knew my mom was protecting me from the truth. I never asked, I never wanted to know. And now he was here not only to see if I was alright, but to take me back with him. Since I am still a minor and Luke isn't my real father, David will take me back to live with him. This sucks. I still have one year left of school. My mom was planning my senior pictures and we had started to talk about my graduation party. We were going to take a mother-daughter vacation before I went away to college. None of that is going to happen now. I will never see my mother again. She won't be at my graduation, she won't see Louis start first grade, or see me get married or see Louis graduate. I won't have her around for talks we have about boys and friends. She won't be around to help me make decisions that I can't make on my own. What was I going to do without her? What were Luke and Louis going to do without her? What was I going to do without Luke and Louis?

David came back with the nurse and she checked my vitals and flashed a light down my throat and in my eyes. "You look much better, the doctor is going to come talk to you in a bit and you will be able to go home." The woman smiled at me before leaving the room.

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"Charlotte..." David started.
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[&]quot;Where is Louis?" I asked.

[&]quot;He is in the other room."

[&]quot;Is he alright?" I asked.

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"Yes, he will be fine, Luke is in there also. Why don't you go see them, they are in the room next door. I will fill out your paperwork and let you know when the doctor comes to see you." He said.

"I don't want to go back with you." I said before I left the room. I didn't want him to tell me I had to. "How is he," I asked Luke as I walked into the room. Louis was hooked up to a machine and he was still asleep.

"He is doing well, he has first degree burns on his arms and legs, and his lungs are damaged from the smoke but the doctor said he will be just fine. He might have scars from the burns, but nothing too serious. He can go home in a few days." Luke said. His face was still puffy. He came over and hugged me.

"I don't want to go with him." I said with tears in my eyes. "Do I have to go?" I asked.

"Charlotte, I don't want you to go either, but I can't do anything about it. He is your father and he loves you just as much as Louis and I do. I know it will be hard but you can start over there." He said.

I started to cry again. "I don't want to go. I want to stay with you guys. I don't know him." I sobbed into his shoulder.

"I know. I know." Luke said, stroking my hair.

MY MOTHER'S FUNERAL was to be held on Saturday, so her family could be there. And I would be leaving Monday morning to live with David. I didn't want to. I wanted to stay here with Luke and Louis. They were the only ones who were going through the same situation I was in. And I didn't know David very well. Summer Break would start Friday before I left

but my teachers still let me off the hook with my semester tests. They said I had enough stress with everything else going on that they would give me study materials and let me use my books on the tests. I already get good grades, but I liked this advantage.

Saturday morning came and went faster than any other day that whole week. Everyone told me how sorry they were for my "loss". People I didn't know hugged me, and they were crying.

The funeral was the most beautiful and the saddest thing I had ever been to. I watched as the oak casket was wheeled down the aisle in our church. It was covered in a bouquet of mom's favorite flower, white Daises. The whole church smelled of them; they didn't smell the best, but it didn't matter to anyone. I remember looking back at the casket as it was being pushed down the aisle and my grandmother, Anne, caught my eye.

She was wearing a black dress with a funny black hat that was from the forties. It reminded me of all the times I used to go over to her house and play dress up using her hats. One day, mom and I played dress up and had a tea party on the terrace at Grandma Anne's. My mom wore a white dress with large black polka dots; she also wore that black hat. Mother always looked so beautiful in whatever she wore. I thought about that day during most of the funeral service. I knew everything there was to know about my mother, and I already knew what the pastor was going to say about her.

SUNDAY I STAYED with Luke and Louis at my Grandma Anne's house. We played games and talked all night, I woke up early Monday morning and said goodbye to both of them.

"Why do you have to leave, Charlie?" Louis said with a sweet, innocent voice. He was only five years old and didn't understand what was going on.

"I'm going to live with my daddy, but I will come back to see you every chance I can, alright? Don't worry, I'll come back." I tried to explain to him. He looked at me strange when I said my daddy; he looked at Luke with a questionable expression, then it turned sweet and soft.

"Are you going to see mommy?" He asked. It took all of my strength not to cry, my eyes watered and my throat tightened but I swallowed hard and didn't let the tears fall over my lids.

"No honey, we aren't going to see mommy again for a long time. Until we go to heaven. She is watching us though, so you better be good. I'll come visit you when I can."

He looked at me with his big brown eyes and then hugged me with his spaghetti arms, not questioning me anymore. "I love you, Charlie," he said with his angelic voice. "I'm going to miss you."

"I'm going to miss you, too. I love you, Louie." I told him. I hugged Luke and Grandma Anne. It was the worst goodbye I have ever done and I kept the tears in long enough to get into the car without Louis seeing me cry.

THE PLANE RIDE was long and boring. It was a four-hour flight to New York, then we switched planes, and it was an eight-hour flight, which seemed like days. The plane supplied three movies, but they were movies I had already seen. I listened for half of the first movie then fell asleep for an hour. When I awoke, they were between movies, so I watched outside

my window for a while, even though I couldn't see anything except the blue sky and big white fluffy clouds. I watched the clouds as they moved and made different shapes. One cloud was shaped as a frog doing ballet, another resembled Goofy without a hat. I watched the clouds until the sun started going down. It was beautiful! The sun was a bright orange color, below the sun, the sky was blue fading up to purple then red and finally orange; the higher I looked, the more colorful the horizon was. I watched until the sun finally disappeared.

"Charlotte, wake up, we're there," David told me. I don't remember when I fell asleep, but I had slept the rest of the plane ride. My eyes were still puffy and heavy from crying so even though I slept, I still felt tired.

"Please tell me you live close to the airport, I can't sit any longer," I complained, trying to get the numbness in my butt to go away. I didn't want to keep crying in front of him. I didn't want to be here but I didn't want him to feel bad or try to talk to me about it. We walked out of the airport right as a man standing before us smiled at David and opened the door of a limo for us. He took David's luggage and my one small bag from us and set them in the trunk as we climbed inside.

"I live about a half hour away from here, but we can walk around for a bit, if you want," David started. "You need new things, anyway. Do you want to go to a few stores before heading home?" The way he said "home" made me cringe. It wasn't my home; my home was back with Luke and Louis. I was hoping this would just be temporary, but I knew I was only hoping. This was my home now, indefinitely, at least until I

moved out, or went away to college. I should start looking at colleges close to Louis.

"No, I'm tired from the long flight, and I just want to rest. Do we have time to go tomorrow?" I asked as I pulled my feet in close to me, getting comfortable.

"I have to go back to work tomorrow, but my wife, Marilyn, would be happy to take you wherever you need to go," David answered. I know he wanted me to feel at home, but I didn't want to go shopping with Marilyn. She wasn't going to replace my mother, ever. I knew that's not what his plan was but, I guess I could give her a chance. Trying to be difficult was too much work. I should try to settle in as fast as I can so I can try to become happy again. If I fight it I will end up depressed and miserable and being miserable right now is already giving me a stomach ache.

I had fallen asleep again on the way to the house. I was exhausted from the past week's events and just hadn't been getting enough sleep. I woke up right before we reached the gates of the large vineyard; it was very dark. All I could see was the impression of the house in the distance about a quarter of a mile up the driveway. It was a huge house that had a fountain in the center of the circle driveway. The driveway was lit with old style street lights. I had to admit it was beautiful.

"This is where you live?" I asked a little more awake, impressed by the view. The house itself was twice the size of my old house and the land it sat on.

"You live here now too, Charlotte." David told me. I could feel his eyes looking at me but I didn't take my eyes off the house in the distance. I didn't want him to think I was impressed by his lavish life-style.

The house grew bigger and bigger the closer we got to it. I hope the inside is as nice as the outside I thought to myself. When I got out of the limo, David's wife and their maid greeted us. Marilyn pulled me to her and hugged me. She was a tiny lady, very small and bony. "Hello Charlotte, it's so nice to finally meet you. I'm so sorry for your loss. I know it's going to take a lot to get used to but feel free to explore any room in the house, nothing is off limits here. We want you to feel comfortable here." She turned to David and hugged and kissed him. "Come inside you guys." Marilyn seemed nice; she walked me into the house as the maid took my purse and coat to "my room".

"I know it's late, but do you want me to show you around?" Marilyn asked. She smiled at David, then at me. Marilyn had short straight black hair, and her clothes reminded me of a senator. She wore a beige business suit skirt on the bottom and a deep blue blouse on top, the matching coat must be hanging up somewhere.

"Can we look around tomorrow? I'm tired and I've had a long week. I just... I just want to be left alone for a little while, if that's alright." I told them.

"I understand; I will show you to your room." Marilyn said as she tried to break a smile across her face. I felt a little mad at myself for hurting her feelings, she was trying to be nice and welcoming. I told myself I would be nicer to her tomorrow.

"Here is your room, we spent all weekend preparing it for you, and I hope you like it." Marilyn said, kindly.

"Thank you." I said as I walked in with my little bag of belongings I had in my car.

"Charlotte, I'm glad you're here, but I'm so sorry about your mom. I have heard amazing things about her from your dad." She said as she smiled sweetly. "See you in the morning." She closed the door behind me.

AS DARKNESS FILLED the house and everyone was getting ready for bed, I laid wide-awake in the unfamiliar room. It was uncomfortably quiet. I looked around the room, which was glowing from the moon outside the window. The dead silence faded away as I heard muffled noises coming from a vent in the floor. I got out of bed and lay down by it and listened. It was David and Marilyn talking, but I couldn't understand what they were saying. It sounded like a bunch of mumbling, but I still lay listening, it soothed my loneliness...

"Do you think Charlotte will like it here?" Marilyn asked David.

"I think she will, she just needs some time to get used to the environment and all the new changes. But if she is anything like me she will recover quickly. It is hard for me to be sad about things for long periods of time." David answered.

"She must feel lonely, she just lost her mother and now all she has is you, and she doesn't know you that well... I mean, she has to start over." Marilyn says as they talk back and forth.

"I know. I wish I could have been there for her more. I know she doesn't like it here, but I hope she learns to love it. I hope she warms up fast."

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"I'm sure she will. I remember when we first moved out here, you didn't like it either... it took you two weeks to finally give it a chance, and look... now you love it here."

"That's probably because of the features of this old house, like the backyard and the library. Those two things were my favorite aspects of this house. I didn't like it at first because it was different from the states. This country has grown on me."

"Did you tell her about...?" Marilyn starts but is quickly cut off.

"No. I'm not sure how to tell her. And she has so much to worry about I don't know how to bring it up. I'll just wait and see how she does here.

"I guess we can only wait and let her move at her own pace." Marilyn said with a sad tone.

"What's wrong?"

"I want her to like me and I know it's going to be hard for her being the only women in the house besides myself. I want her to be able to come to me with questions, but I'm afraid she isn't going to want to, because her mother is the one that was there for her. It must be terrible without her mom."

"Just be a friend to her and she will love you... just like I do."

"Do you care if I go with you and Charlotte shopping tomorrow? I want to get to know her a little better and let her get to know me, too. I really want her to be happy here and be as comfortable as possible."

"Actually, I was hoping you would want to go instead of me. I have an important meeting tomorrow night with the

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council and I need to get my plans for the new storage unit ready to present to the board after that." David said. "Thanks honey."

Chapter 2

"CHARLOTTE." MARILYN called to me from outside the door. I had fallen asleep on the floor by the vent. I jumped up and crawled into bed.

"Come in," I called back to her.

"How did you sleep?" She asked with a warm joyful voice. Marilyn wasn't in her business attire but rather in jeans and a t-shirt. She came over and stood by the edge of my bed.

"Fine." I didn't know what else to say. We were in awkward silence for a few seconds until Marilyn broke in.

"Umh, your dad is busy working on some business, and asked me to take you to get some more clothes, and maybe a few things to make you feel more comfortable here. Is that alright?"

"Yeah, I guess that's fine."

A small smile formed on Marilyn's face as she said, "Okay, well why don't you get dressed and come down for breakfast and we can leave after that."

Breakfast was good; David had his own chef, which didn't surprise me after the maid took my purse last night when I

arrived. Chef Mallow was a very sweet man; he whipped up anything I asked for, which wasn't much since I didn't have my appetite fully back to normal from my exhausting misadventure.

"Thank you for the breakfast it was very good." I complimented then asked. "Where is Marilyn?"

"You're welcome." Chef Mallow said, "I think Ms. Marilyn is in her office, it's the second door on the left, off the living room."

"Thank you." I said as I gave him a smile and walked towards the living room. The living room was all white and seemed kind of small compared to the rest of the house; it was smaller than the room I was staying in.

(Knock, Knock)

"Come in," Marilyn told me. I walked into the small room; Marilyn was sitting at a large brown desk, talking on the phone. She motioned me to take a seat in front of the desk where two chairs were present. "Alright, yeah, that sounds great... Yep, can't wait to see you too, I will call you tomorrow. Okay, love you." She hung up the phone and smiled at me.

"That was my son Harper, he finished school a week ago and is at a camp working all summer but he will be back two weeks before school starts. He's your age." She paused for a brief second and continued when I didn't say anything. "So, did you get enough to eat?"

"Yes."

"Good, let me grab my purse and we can go."

THE SHOPPING TRIP went pretty well. Marilyn seemed sincerely interested in what I liked. I wasn't exactly thrilled at shopping but I wasn't sure how much longer I would want to

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wear the same outfit. The first thing we went to get me was a cell phone, which hadn't even crossed my mind for something to get, but then Marilyn said if I didn't want to shop with her she would understand and all I had to do was call her when I was done. I know she was just giving me space if I wanted it, but I couldn't be mean to her, plus I didn't want to be left alone. After spending three short hours of buying clothes, we went out for lunch. I was starting to like Marilyn; she was genuine and very open when she talked. She didn't hold anything back, if she didn't like something she told me. And when I wanted to talk she just listened, she only gave her opinion when I wanted it, which was nice to just be able to talk and have someone not tell me what they think, but to just listen and let me get all my thoughts out. I was so comfortable talking to Marilyn that I shared stories about my mom and the good old days we had shopping together. I wasn't sure if that would upset Marilyn until after I had started to talk about it, but I looked for any change in her face, but found only smiles. She even told me some stories of her own. I was really grateful I came shopping today with Marilyn and not David; because I'm sure this experience would not have been the same and I might not have seen this side of Marilyn right away. I feel like I made a friend today that I didn't know I could have.

"CHARLOTTE WOULD YOU like to come to work with me today?" David asked me during breakfast. The only part of the vineyard I had seen was the grape vines I could see from my bedroom window. I don't drink, so wine isn't very appealing to me and I wasn't thrilled about looking at or learning about it, but I didn't want to disappoint David. He was just trying to get me out of the house.

"That sounds like it could be fun." I smiled at him before I took another bite of my toast.

David owned a large vineyard and winery where he grew grapes, strawberries, and raspberries, for making juice, jam, and, of course, wine. The whole wine making process was done in the buildings surrounding the fruit, the only time any products left the vineyard was when they were completed and ready to be sold.

"We planted apple, pear, and cherry trees a few years ago, so we could try them as wine also." David informed me as we walked along the path to the vineyard about a quarter mile up from the house. There were many workers picking unripe grapes in the field next to us. I watched as I wondered what they were doing. David saw my curiosity.

"This is the green harvest. They are picking bunches of grapes to limit the weight the vines have to support. This delivers more nutrients to the remaining grapes and also gives them a richer flavor." David informed me. When we arrived at the three large buildings at the end of the path, the sun was going behind the house. It reminded me of the sunset I saw on the plane. It had the same bright colors and the same color clouds. I couldn't help but let my mind drift to my mother. I missed her so much. I wondered what we would be doing right now if she was still here. Would we be playing ball outside with Louis? Or maybe we would be swimming at the lake. Or maybe we would be baking cookies. I felt a tear escape from the corner

of my eye and run down my cheek. I quickly wiped it off and followed David inside.

Even with the light on, it was still dark. The whole place smelled like grape juice. David led me to the first part of my tour, the beginning of the wine making process. We walked through each step as we moved throughout the building. When we came to the end of the process we entered another room. It was full of wine racks and large jugs and barrels labeled with times and dates when each was made. Most of them were from last year's harvest but some were anywhere from two to eight years.

"This barrel is part of the first batch I ever made." David told me as he pointed to a barrel in the back of the room. It looked much older than all of the rest and the date was from 2004.

"How did you know you wanted to start a winery?" I asked him. He took a few minutes to answer, while he walked over to the wine rack.

"This vineyard was Marilyn's families, and when we married, the family handed it down to her, but she wasn't as interested in it as much as her other family had been, so she wanted to sell it, but I wouldn't let her. Since then on, I have been running it. Sometimes people don't choose to do things, those things choose them." David explained. "This bottle," he started as he pulled on the cork until it popped open, "is white grape and strawberry wine. It is my favorite." He pulled out two glasses from a shelf next to the wine rack. "Would you like to try it?" I nodded and he handed me a glass. My first instinct was to smell it. It was the same sweet smell that the whole building

had. I tipped the glass letting the pink wine barely touch my lips. The taste was sweet but also had a tingle to it that I guessed most alcohol probably had. It was good though. I took an actual drink this time. "Do you like it?"

"It is different, but yeah it's good." I said. I liked the wine but not enough to want more. Even if the drinking age in Europe was lower than it was in the U.S., I still didn't mind waiting until I was 21. After David cleaned out the glasses and returned them to the place he got them, he grabbed the bottle of wine he had opened and we walked back up to the house. It was dark outside but the path was lit by vintage green street lamps. I hadn't noticed them before now, but I hadn't been here long enough to notice much. The fruit trees were lit up by Christmas lights, also. "Won't that hurt the trees, having those lights on it?"

"No, they are fine." David answered with a smile. "I had fun with you Charlie. I really hope you can make yourself at home here. It was terrible what happened, but I'm very glad you are alright and I get a chance to get to know you."

"Thanks, David- uh, Dad. It is nice here. I just need some time to get used to things. It's just not the same and it never will be." I tried to hold back my tears. I missed my mom so much. She would have loved to see this place.

"Charlie, you know if you ever need anything or anyone to talk to, both Marilyn and I are here for you."

"I know, I just can't believe I will never see her again. I never even got to say goodbye." I said as tears finally broke free from my eyes and fell to my cheeks. David pulled me close to his side.

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"I know it's hard without her, and it will be hard for a while. Time can only make it better." He said as he kissed my head.

"I just miss her so much." I bawled.

Dear Luke and Louis,

How are you guys doing? I miss you both so much. I feel like I have been gone forever. I hope to see you soon. Have Louis call me anytime he needs something, I would love to talk to him. I miss you and I love you

Charlotte

I have really gotten used to it here. I spend a lot of time in the library, typing. I send messages to Luke and Louis, sometimes as much as six times a day. I haven't gotten the courage to explore yet. This house is huge, and the yard is even bigger. I have made friends with Chef Mallow, he is pretty cool. He lets me help him cook sometimes and he tells me lots of stories about Marilyn and her boys, Harper and Kaisen. Harper will be turning 18 six months after I do. Kaisen turns 19 a few months after my birthday. So we are all very close in age. I will be meeting Harper at the end of the summer before we start our senior year of high school. Kaisen is taking summer classes at his college so I won't meet him until Thanksgiving. Summer is turning out to be fairly good, considering the circumstances. I get to call Louis whenever I want and I can Skype with my friend Holly from back home, and no one brings up my mother, which makes it a lot easier not to think about the fire.

Noël Marzën

I am a lot more like David than I realized. We have some of the same habits, for instance we both eat macaroni and cheese with ketchup. Marilyn thinks we are both weird when it comes to eating habits. I have David's nose, chin and cheek bones. I also have his dark brown hair and the same argument strategy. For living so far away for so long we seem to have the same reaction to almost everything, which makes me wonder: am I the sophisticated one or is he the immature one?

"Charlotte, may I come in?" David asked, as he cracked my door open waiting for my response.

"Yeah," I answered. I had woken up early and was lying down on my bed with a book. I sat up as David entered my room.

"I have a business meeting outside of Paris and Marilyn will be gone all afternoon, are you all right to stay here by yourself?"

"I'll be fine here; won't Chef Mallow be here as well as the other staff?"

"Yes, they'll be here, but they will be working."

"Then I'll be fine. Besides I have the library to entertain me."

"Well we won't be too long; we should both be back before dinner." He came over and kissed my forehead before he left.

I waited until I couldn't hear him in the hall; I got dressed and went down stairs to get breakfast from Chef Mallow.

"What are you going to do this morning, Ms. Charlotte?" Chef Mallow asked. He always called people by a proper name.

"Do you have to call me Ms. Charlotte? It sounds... funny." I asked in a smile.

Crimson Current

"What would you like me to call you, ma'am?" He asked, partially sarcastic. Chef Mallow was funny and very nice. He was a heavy man which made it easy to remember his name because he resembled a Marshmallow.

"I don't know, anything but Ms. Charlotte. That sounds like a name of a ship."

"All right," he said pausing for a moment, acting like he was thinking of an appropriate nickname. "How about... Chuck?"

"No," I laughed.

"Charlie?"

"Charlie? My little brother calls me that." I agreed.

"Well then, Princess Charlie, what would you like to eat?"

I cringed when he said "princess," I gave him a jokingly dirty look, and shrugged him off. "How about some breakfast pizza?" I asked him. Before I could say any more he had a medium sized breakfast pizza in front of me.

"I knew that's what you would want. So... you never did answer my question. What are you going to do this morning?"

"I haven't decided, but I think I'm going to explore the house, I have only seen a few rooms and I want to look around a bit."

"Have fun with that, but don't explore the maze without anyone to go with you. When Kaisen and Harper where younger, they raced through the maze and Kaisen got lost and it took Marilyn two hours to find him." Chef Mallow was being serious but let out a small laugh at the same time.

"I thought they just moved here, when Marilyn and David got married?"

"Marilyn and the boys have lived here since Harper was born, but David moved in after they got married. This was Marilyn's family's vineyard and she had already been running it when they met."

"Oh, I just assumed they moved here together to take over the vineyard after the wedding. Well, thanks for the breakfast, but if it's okay I'm going to take a few pieces to go." I said with a smile, and then strolled out of the kitchen.

I walked around the house for a couple hours, just looking at the different rooms. There had to be at least thirty. I noticed that down the hall from my room was Kaisen's. Across from his room was Harper's room. There were three other doors in this hallway. The door next to mine was a bowling alley with four lanes, the door across from that was a home theater system equipped with a popcorn machine and a mini bar filled with candy and pop. All the way down the hall, next to Harper's room, was the last door. It was very dark inside because there weren't any windows. I wasn't sure what this room was for until I took a trip inside. I searched for a light switch with my fingers blindly running along the walls. I found a small round switch... I turned it. The lights faded up, it was a huge room with black walls with long vertical slits. There was a large keyboard on the wall next to the light switch. I walked over to it. I pressed a green button that read "power." A screen I hadn't noticed at first lit up above the keyboard. It had a bunch of titles on it... Tropical Paradise, Alien Planet, Jungle, Appalachian Mountains... I was curious, and a little confused so I pressed the button that read "Tropical Paradise." Instantly, the black walls changed into a beach scene with palm trees and where the slits in the wall were, large palm trees lit up. What was this place, I thought to myself... I wasn't sure, but it was pretty cool. It must have been a virtual reality system. I pressed Appalachian Mountains next... it got colder instantly, the scenery was mostly gray mountains and rock formations. The tropical trees faded into snow caps and the long beach was now a snowy ledge. It was beautiful and so surreal. After playing with the room's virtual system, I turned it off and kept exploring.

FOR THE NEXT FEW weeks I did the same thing almost every day. I read in my room, typed to friends and family on the computer and ate meals when I was supposed to. I moped around the house when I was too upset to read or talk to anyone. I just couldn't pull myself together some days. I was on the verge of a major breakdown when Marilyn came up to talk to me. She always tried to cheer me up, with little success.

"Charlotte, may I come in?" She asked as she stood outside my bedroom door.

"I don't care." I called from in my pillow. I had been crying all day and my eyes and nose were red and sore from rubbing them. I hadn't changed from my pajamas, even though it was four o'clock in the afternoon.

"Sweetie, are you alright?" She asked as she sat next to me on the bed. She rubbed my back and didn't let me respond to her question. "Hon, your father and I are worried about you. I know you are still upset about your mom, but you need to know that she wouldn't want you to put yourself through this, would she? Even though she isn't here with you now, doesn't mean

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you should forget about her but you need to keep going. She would want you to be strong and be happy again. This is your chance to start over and I know you might not want to but will you please try? Your father loves you so much and we all hate seeing you like this." She paused to see if I was still listening. I didn't know what to do; I knew she was right even if I didn't want her to be. And no matter how hard I think it is, I needed to be happy. I need to forget about the bad stuff that happened, but not forget my mother. I wiped my face on my pillow before I sat up to hug Marilyn.

"I'm sorry." I apologized.

Chapter 3

Dear Luke,

How are you? I'm fine. I found some pictures of mom today. They are really old but I wasn't sure if you found anything of hers in the fire. I miss her so much. I miss you both so much too. I scanned the pictures to the computer and am sending them to you. Tell Louis I love and miss him, and I can't wait to see him. I love you and miss you, too.

Charlotte

TWO MONTHS AGO, I was hanging out with friends and still had my mom around to help me with school and work. She was still in my life... physically. Now I am in the process of starting a new life with my dad and his new family. My mother is still a big part of my life, but only in the mental images that will be preserved in my mind forever. I have been through a lot these past few months but my dad and his wife have made it easier than it should ever be. I feel like I have known them a long time and wish, now, that I had them in my life before I was forced by law to live with them.

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I have decided to let go of the hurt in my past and let my new life take its place. I will never forget my mother or my friends and family I left behind when I came to Europe. I am letting go of the fire and my old belongings and not looking at the bad in it all, but instead looking at it in a different perspective. Everything happens for a reason, even if it was hard to comprehend. I was supposed to live with my father, maybe if I would have given him a chance my mother would still be here, maybe not. I didn't know the reason for this disaster, but I know in my heart everything will be all right.

I had already given this place a chance and to my surprise, I actually liked it. If I had to live anywhere besides with Luke and Louis, it would be here. David was the nicest businessman I had ever met. He owned one of the largest vineyards in Europe and was the head of command. He was caring and loving and tried to make time for his family. I wasn't fond of his wife Marilyn when I first met her. She seemed too cheery, almost fake. She had actually turned out to be a very nice lady. She wasn't old, or boring, she liked the same things I did, so all in all, she was cool. I will meet Harper, Marilyn's youngest son today. I'm sure if I like his mother, I will like him, too. If I don't I will get over it, eventually.

I walked down the hallway from my room and entered into the library. The library was the best room in the house. It reminded me of the library in 'The Beauty and the Beast.' The library was two stories. When I walked in I was standing on the top floor. There was a balcony with matching staircases on either side. Books lined the walls. Under the balcony were double doors that led me down a long corridor. This led to the main hallway, where the master bedroom was, along with Marilyn and David's offices, and other unknown rooms.

Marilyn went with Tom, the chauffeur, shopping and to pick up Harper from the airport. I walked down the grand staircase, passing the living room where David was sitting with some associates from his company. Before I could fully pass the meeting, David stopped me for an introduction.

"Good morning, Charlotte." David started, "Gentlemen, this is my daughter."

"Nice to meet you all," I said politely. I smiled as they all stood to greet me. "I'm going to explore the maze after breakfast if that's alright?"

"Take your phone with you and call me if you need anything at all. I will be done shortly."

"Okay." I walked passed them out of the living room and into the kitchen to see what Chef Mallow was cooking for breakfast.

"Chef Mallow, I hope you have a big breakfast made, I'm starving." I said jokingly as I smiled.

"How do fried donuts sound? I also made pancakes." He answered.

"Sounds good to me, I'll have fried donuts." I said. "What are you making for lunch?"

"We will have a small lunch today," he started, "Mr. Harper won't be back until supper time so I'm making it big. Ms. Marilyn won't be here for lunch either so it will just be you and Mr. David. We are having sandwiches for lunch and Mallow Roast for dinner. It is my own special recipe."

"Thanks for the breakfast, it was wonderful. I'm going to go exploring again. Please call me for lunch when it's ready." I said after eating and putting my plate away.

"Yes, your majesty," he said with a grin. I just gave him a joking glare and walked out of the room.

All right, there is a trick to this maze, I thought to myself as I walked out into the sunny yard. I just have to find out what it is.

The maze was about a half mile in length. I had time to spare so I took a deep breath and headed in. Right when I got inside the hedge, I had to turn right; the path wouldn't let me go anywhere else. I walked about twenty feet and I had to turn almost all the way around to stay on the path. I walked about ten feet and came to another one way. So, I turned right and kept heading down the path. I thought the maze was really easy to get through; everywhere I went was a one way. How can anyone get lost if the whole maze is like this?

I kept walking when I came to the first T-intersection. I looked down both paths and they both looked the same, green hedges on both sides and a brown dirt path on the ground. I turned left and walked down a short path that led me to another left. I turned and looked down that path and there was a large mirror hanging on the maze wall not far from where I was standing. This scared me because I saw myself but at a quick glance I thought I saw someone else and my heart jumped into my stomach as I gasped. I looked closer at it and laughed. It was a dead end, so I turned back and took the other direction. I walked on through the maze running into T-intersections and more dead ends. I walked for about ten minutes when I came to

a fork in the path. This was a three-way intersection. I took the middle path; I met another intersection followed by another until finally I came to a dead end. I turned back and took the other direction from the last intersection. That also came to a dead end. This was confusing. Neither path was correct, I had to go back to the intersection before this one and start again. Neither of those paths led on either, they all came to dead ends. I walked back and forth trying to find my way when I walked all the way back to the fork intersection. I took the path on the left this time, but eventually I was lead back to the fork intersection.

All right, I have to take the path on the right, I thought. I walked down a few paths again and hit a few dead ends, until I came to an intersection that had signs above each path. The one on the left said 'the long way' and the right one said 'the short cut.' Was this a trick, I asked myself, which way should I take? If I hit a dead end I can always come back and take the other direction.

I took the short cut; it took me to where the path ended and where a big area was. It had three white park style benches in a circle around a large circle gazebo. The gazebo was white and had icicle lights hanging down from the ceiling; it had a brown wood dance floor. There was music playing but I had to really listen to hear it. This garden-like area had flowers around the outside of the gazebo and when you look up at the sky, there are lights hanging across the top of the hedges, so when it's dark they light up the whole area. I must be in the center of the maze, that didn't take very long. David said it takes hours to get through the whole thing, and he is the only one who has ever

made it through the whole thing the first time. Usually when people go through the maze they get lost or can't make it through in one try. I looked down at my phone. Oh. I was in here a lot longer than I thought. If I'm already half way through it, it will take me another two hours to get out. There were two paths at the opposite end of the garden. I went down the left one this time and walked a long ways but there were no more intersections or dead ends. I kept walking until finally I came to another open area. But it looked like the same garden I was just at. It was the same garden. I had just walked in a circle.

I picked up my phone and called David.

"David- Dad, I am in the maze and I can't find my way out, will you come help me?" I said hoping he wasn't busy.

I could hear him laugh, "Sure, give me ten minutes to find you, do you know what side of the maze you are on?"

"I'm in an open area with a gazebo and Christmas lights." I explained.

"You got far; I know exactly where you are. I will see you soon, stay there."

It's going to take him more than ten minutes to get here, it took me two hours to make it this far. I wonder if he has a map to the maze, or maybe he knew it well enough to take the correct turns.

I sat down on one of the benches and waited for David to get there. I waited and watched the pathway that led me here.

"Come on, I'll show you the trick to get out of here," David said as he came up behind me.

"You scared me, how did you get here? I watched the entrance to the garden and you didn't come from that way."

"I came from the secret passage from the yard to this garden. There are many hidden pathways to get here but you have to look for them. Since you got lost and have already found this garden I'll show you the passage out of here, in case you get stuck again." David said as he smiled at me. He led me to the hedge wall that had a single red leaf on it, barely visible, even up close. It was just at eye level and smaller than all the rest of the leaves.

David reached his hand out to the small red leaf and stuck it through the hedge right underneath of it so it was barely touching his arm. I watched in excitement as the hedge opened to a pathway.

"If you use these passages, you must close the door behind you." He said in a serious voice.

"Okay, I will," I said in excitement. He led me down the narrow pathway as we came to a hedge wall, I looked around, and there was no way out. I looked at the hedge in front of me, and there, barely visible, was a small red leaf. "Is that another opening?" I asked as David nodded. "Can I try?" I reached out my hand and put it in the hedge just below the red leaf and felt around. There was a handle with a small lever on it; I pulled the lever and a door opened to just outside the maze.

"Whoa, that was really neat." I said.

"I'm glad you like it, I like to escape sometimes, and the trap doors come in handy when trying to get out in a hurry or just too lazy to try to find the real exit. I think I have only used the exit twice." He smiled.

"Thanks for showing me."

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"No problem, just make sure you take your phone every time you go into the maze. Just because there are ways out does not mean you can always find them and some of them have been known to get stuck shut. And make sure you always tell someone you are going in there, so if something happens we know where to find you." He was being very serious now.

"I will."

"You must be hungry. Do you want to go out for lunch?" "Sure."

"Okay, go up and change, we will leave as soon as you're ready."

THE REST OF THE DAY went by very fast; when David and I got back from lunch, I went back up to my room, stopping at the library for a book first. I didn't like reading that much but since I have been here that is about all I have done. I had been reading a series of books before I came here and I was curious on what happened in them. When I found them in the library, I had to pick them up and read the rest of them. I read for a few hours, it was easy for me to lose track of time in my books when I had something interesting to read. I mostly enjoyed romance novels and fantasy books. When I found a series with both romance and fantasy in it, I fell in love with them. I had just ended a chapter when David knocked on my door. He told me that his parents were coming for dinner and they would be here in an hour. I need to get ready. I was supposed to wear something nice. Marilyn and Harper would be back a little after my grandparents. I told him that I would get ready after I went downstairs to get something to drink. He nodded at me and left the room quietly.

On my way back up to my room, I walked past the virtual reality room. I still hadn't found out what the rooms intent was. I thought for a while about this room, was I missing something? I pondered over the mystery of the room for a few minutes, and then noticed I was staring off into space. I quickly re-gathered my thoughts and walked into my room. My room was wonderful, way better than what my room had looked like in America. This room was my favorite color...pink. It was a lot of pink, maybe even too much, but I liked it. The carpet was a light pink shade that blended well with the walls, which were also pink, but in a textured look. When I walked into my room the first thing in my view, and closest to me was a small round table. The table was made of some kind of dark stained wood. The table was small and round with a bowl of pink potpourri, for decoration, in the middle. Next to the table, on the opposite side of where I was standing was a pink chaise with matching pink pillow. The chaise was facing a flat screen television that hung from the ceiling. It could be seen from the chair and the bed, which was sitting on the right side of the room, in the middle against the wall. The bed was a light pink with gold tassels and accents. The headboard was a pale gold-yellow. Above the bed was a crystal-based chandelier that somehow did not block the television. There were matching bedside tables on each side of the bed. Matching pink lamps sat on each of them, also. The whole bed looked like it was from the Victorian Era. The bed was double, with huge pillows that took up most of the space. There were three windows on the far wall. One parallel to the bed, one a little farther than the television, and one parallel to the vanity which was stained to match the rest of the wood tables in the room. It had a large round mirror in the center. At the far end of the extravagant room, across from the bed, was a double door closet. The doors had hanging racks for my belts and purses. On the left side of the closet were shelves and drawers. It carried everything that couldn't be hung up. On the right side was everything else... everything that could be hung up. Even though I had only been shopping once, my closet was completely full. Marilyn had given me some of her clothes and she was a shop-aholic. The day she took me shopping was the largest shopping trip of my life. She took me into thirteen different stores and we didn't walk out of a single store without buying at least two bags full of stuff. It wasn't just clothes either; we bought handbags, jewelry, room accents, accessories, body lotions, even towels matching my room had the name...Charlotte hand sewn on. In one day worth of shopping, we probably spent close to eight thousand dollars. We went out to eat at a Tapas Bar for lunch. It was the most amazing shopping day ever. We walked several miles and also road in a large taxi.

As I dreamed about my first day here and how my room looked, I heard a noise coming from down the stairs. People were talking. I walked down the long corridor to see who was here. It was an old couple; they were hugging David and taking off their coats. Did I really lose track of time? Was that David's parents? I was supposed to be getting ready for our dinner guests and I forgot all about it. I rushed back to my room, throwing my closet door open searching for something to wear.

I put on an outfit that was hanging together in my closet; it was almost like it was waiting for me. The whole outfit was ready to go. It was a knee length black pencil skirt with a silver shirt with a red cardigan. Below the hanging outfit was a pair of silver pumps. Around the neck of the hanger that the outfit was hanging from, were a set of three colored beaded bracelets and a matching necklace. I put on the outfit and curled the ends of my hair pulling up the sides in an invisible sized rubber band. I put on makeup and rushed out the door. I walked very fast but as elegant as I could, I wanted to make a good first impression. I walked down one side of the grand staircase and into the sitting area where David was. As they noticed that I was entering the room, David and his parents stood to greet me.

"Charlotte, these are my parents and your grandparents, Charles and Gretta." David said introducing me.

"Nice to meet you both." I told them as I gave them both a hug.

"It's very nice to finally meet you, my child. We have been looking forward to this since you were born." Gretta said in a scratchy voice. She was short and thin with silver hair that was wrapped in a bun on the upper part of her head. She didn't look like a grandma, apart from the hair; she had semi-smooth skin. Her skin wasn't wrinkly like normal old ladies, and her husband didn't look very aged either. He looked like he was David's much older brother but too young looking for his father or my grandfather for that matter. They were nice people, and I supposed that sooner or later I would have to start calling them grandma and grandpa but it was nice that they didn't seem that way. I am not fond of old people, especially the really old kind.

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Old people smell funny and did weird things and sometimes don't see or hear well. These old people were different though, I wondered if it was a genetic thing or if they had plastic surgery. That was common around here; everyone in Paris looked fake, so beautiful it didn't look real.

"Do you like it here, Charlotte?" Charles asked.

"Yes, it's very nice."

"Well, I'm glad you like it. We are glad to have you here." He added. We sat in an awkward silence for a few minutes until there was a small flash of light through one of the windows facing the driveway.

"Ah, Marilyn and Harper are here, finally." David said jumping up and rushing to the door. I did the same. The silence was deafening and uncomfortable. It was almost like David's parents could hear what I was thinking or at least could hear what each other where thinking. They looked back and forth at each other like they were having a mind-to-mind conversation. It was kind of creepy.

Chapter 4

DAVID OPENED THE DOOR for Marilyn and Harper as they walked into the house. The wind blew inside and it was warmer outside then it was inside. It was sticky and warm, like the beach almost.

"How was your flight?" David asked a handsome young man who walked into the large open door.

"It was boring and long, until I got off and thought everyone forgot about me." Harper said in smooth, deep voice. He gave Marilyn a glare but couldn't hold it for more than a few seconds when a little smirk rose to his lips. Harper was tall and muscular. He had dark hair like Marilyn and had her smile. He was so cute. He looked much older than 17.

"I couldn't find the terminal, the man at one of the desks said 76A not 67A." Marilyn said in a small voice with her head down as she talked to David, then turned to the boy and said, "I already said I was sorry a million times. Will you ever forgive me?"

The young man grinned, "I'm just joking... Of course I forgive you."

Marilyn gave him a loving smile and turned to look at me. "Oh... Harper this is Charlotte, David's daughter, the one I was telling you about." She explained as if he wasn't able to comprehend the first part.

"I guessed that." he said to Marilyn, then turning to me, greeting me with a quick hand squeeze. It couldn't be a handshake because it was just a brisk grab of the hand then he let go. "Nice to meet you, Charlotte. I'm Harper."

"Nice to meet you, too." I said. I was so glad he was good looking. That would make it easier for me to get along with him. When he dropped my hand, I felt instantly warmer. It was a weird feeling, but I liked it. Harper was very, very good looking, not that I wanted to... like him like that.

David's cell phone rang.

"Hello?" David answered. "Oh, hello..." He started but then was cut off by the person on the other end of the line. I noticed he took a short glance at Marilyn, and then walked off into the other room, where he couldn't be heard.

"Shall we go into the living room and wait to be called to dinner?" Marilyn asked in a rhetorical question to get everyone out of the entryway. As the grandparents greeted Marilyn and Harper, we walked into the living room.

"I see you found the outfit I picked out for you." Marilyn said with a mischievous grin.

"Yes, thank you." I said.

We talked for a while until David entered back into the room.

"Who was that on the phone?" Marilyn asked.

"It was nothing." He said. David isn't a very good liar, at least in the short amount of time I had been here; I could tell when he wasn't telling the whole truth. I wondered who he was talking to on the phone, whoever it was; he was trying to keep it a secret from Marilyn. I wasn't psychic or anything but I understood the way he looked at her.

"So are we ready for dinner then?" Marilyn asked, oblivious to his lie.

"No. Not yet, I don't think Chef Mallow is done. Be patient he will call us when it is ready." He said in a more calming tone. I could tell this was part of the lie. Were they making something special for Marilyn? Or... was someone coming for dinner she didn't know about? Maybe I was wrong but something was up.

We waited in the living room talking for another ten to twenty minutes before I heard a strange noise. The sound of a car in the driveway or...

Chef Mallow came into the living room, "Dinner is served." he said out of breath and startled. It was odd.

We walked into the dining room slowly but surely. David got another call on his cell, that, this time, he kept in the room and talked to someone right in front of us... "Yes? Now? We are getting ready for dinner... Sure. I will be right there." He said hanging up the phone.

"Don't tell me that was a work call?" Marilyn asked.

"Someone is here." He said with a half grin, which you could tell he was trying to sustain it from her eyes. He turned swiftly towards the front door, which was visible from the

dining room. There was a loud knock at the door right as he reached for the door handle. This was too obvious, it was easily noticed that the whole scene was planned out.

David reached for the door, cracking it open just enough that Marilyn couldn't see, as he looked to see if she was looking, which she wasn't. "Oh darling, the door is for you...," he said revealing his big grin and the unexpected guest at the door, at the same time. Marilyn glanced up with a confused expression, until she saw the surprise at the door. My breath caught when I saw the young man standing in the doorway with a big grin on his face as well. Marilyn jumped to her feet and ran to the door, hugging the man. It must be Kaisen. I have seen pictures but he looks different in person. He looked just like Harper, but with a little bit of facial hair, and even more gorgeous. He was more muscular than Harper. They were the same height and had the same dark hair. His smile was different from Harper's though. It must come from his father. Kaisen was so beautiful he could pass as a model. There was something about him that made me feel nervous and anxious at the same time.

"Oh my god, I can't believe you're home. I have missed you so much, Kaisen." Marilyn exclaimed with joy. "I thought that you wouldn't be able to get a break until Thanksgiving?"

"I got done with some finals early. I can only stay for a few days. David and I planned to surprise you so Harper and I could be here at the same time." Kaisen explained.

"This is the best surprise ever. Oh, we have someone we would like you to meet..." She said remembering that I was here. "This is Charlotte, David's daughter. She has come to live with us." She was excited to show me off, which was weird

because I had only been here and known her for a short time. Maybe she was just excited that Kaisen came home early... I couldn't tell.

"Nice to meet you, Charlotte." Kaisen said. His enthusiastic grin turned into a charming smile that made me want to melt when he looked at me. I smiled back.

"Nice to meet you, too." I told him as he reached to shake my hand, I reached for his too. Instead of a quick grasp like Harper, he reached down and kissed my hand. It was weird but I loved every second of it. My stomach jumped when his lips touched my skin. I couldn't help to think about meeting Harper a few minutes ago, who felt like a stepbrother type and felt weird thinking he was cute, but Kaisen was a-whole-nother story. Maybe it was just a first impression thing. Hopefully he would get on my nerves and let me not think of him that way... even if he was handsome.

I never would have thought Marilyn's boys would be so charming. They are the total opposite when it came to personalities but are exactly the same when it came to most of their adorable features. Their smiles made a warming feeling inside me, as well as the way they spoke. I thought about this for a while as everyone else ate their dinner and talked. After dinner we all sat around in the living room talking and catching up. It was surprisingly easy to talk to Harper and Kaisen. Usually it's hard to talk to boys, especially the cute ones. I giggled at myself when I thought about that. Luckily, no one heard me.

David's parents were very nice people. As they left, they hugged me and were very kind. Gretta slipped a small jewel

covered square box into my hand and whispered, "This is for you, my child." She kissed me on the forehead, said goodbye and left.

I held the box in my fist so no one else could see the tiny gift.

"It's getting late; you guys should probably head upstairs to your rooms." Marilyn told us.

"It's only 10:30." Harper complained.

"I didn't say you had to go to bed I said you had to go to your rooms. But, I'm tired, and I'm going to bed. I don't care if you stay up just don't wake me up." She said with a wink that was directed at me.

"Alright, good night mother." Harper said, a little more cheerful. He kissed her goodnight, as did Kaisen and they walked slowly away.

"Goodnight, Marilyn." I said as I hugged her.

"Goodnight, Charlotte, I will see you in the morning." She said, kissed my forehead and walked towards her bedroom on the opposite side of the house.

I hid the box in my hand until I got to my room. I sat on my bed and gazed at the little gold box covered in different colored gems. I opened up the container and found an emerald ring inside with a silver and gold twisted band. It was absolutely beautiful; I tried it on right away. It fit perfectly on the ring finger on my right hand.

As I lay in bed idolizing my new ring, I could hear laughter coming from down the hallway. I wonder how long it's been since Kaisen and Harper have seen each other. Marilyn had mentioned Kaisen's college ran long and he doesn't usually

have a break except for during Holidays. That must really suck, only seeing family once or twice a year. I wonder what college he goes to and how far away it is; maybe I'll ask him tomorrow. As I thought about the boys laughing in the other room, I shortly drifted to sleep.

Chapter 5

KAISEN KNOCKED ON my door right before breakfast.

"I'm only home for the rest of this week, so Harper and I made plans to go to Grufon Dunes with some friends. Do you want to come with?" Kaisen asked politely.

"Umh... sure, that sounds cool." I said with a smile. That sounds cool? What am I twelve, I can't find a better word than cool? I'm so dumb.

"Okay, good." He said with a weird look. By the look on his face, it seemed like he was about to say something else but he held his tongue. He just smiled and left my room.

"Harper, hurry up. We are going to Grufon Dunes when you get done with breakfast." Kaisen said.

"That sounds like fun. Do you care if Charlotte goes with you boys? I think she would enjoy that. You could introduce her to some of your friends." David said with an enthusiastic voice.

"Yeah, I already ask her if she wanted to go. I don't know whose clothes she's going to wear." Kaisen answered.

"Harriett probably has an extra pair she can barrow." Harper commented. "I'll text her and ask." He pulled a cell phone from his pocket as he filled his plate with food.

"Why do I need someone else's clothes?" I asked Marilyn.

"Grufon dunes are sand dunes; you will need special clothing for protection from the coarse sand; it also helps keep the sand from getting everywhere." She explained to me then turned toward Kaisen. "You boys better be safe, and be back before dinner, I want to have at least some time with you before you have to go back to school."

"Harriett said she has something you can wear," he said, "so, lets' go." He stood up as he stuffed the last bit of food into his mouth.

"Grab your clothes, Harper and get in my car, I have to get my stuff." Kaisen gestured us towards the garage as he went for the staircase.

When Kaisen got into the driver's side door of his black Camaro, Harper exclaimed, "What is that smell?" It only took me half a second to get a whiff of the strong smell of men's cologne. "Smells like you swam in a bath tub of Potpourri. What are you trying to do, suffocate us? I think I would prefer the smell of B.O. other than that strong crap."

"Shut it!" Kaisen said. I could see his eyes shift in the rear view mirror. It looked like he was looking at me, but he could have been looking out the window. The rest of the ride was quite. I sat back and listened to the radio, not bothering to try to look out the windows. The bucket seats made it hard to see out. Eventually, we pulled up to a huge house a little bigger than David's house.

"What are we doing here?" I asked.

"This is Connor and Jessie Darby's house. They are taking us over to the dunes." Kaisen explained.

We got out of the car and headed towards the house, just then, two girls and three boys came out of the front door and walked towards us. They were all wearing similar clothing, motocross outfits like Harper. When I glanced over to Kaisen I noticed he was wearing the same. All the outfits looked different except Kaisen and another boy looked exactly the same. They were both in red with yellow accents. The two girls looked like professionals in their outfits. One girl wore baby blue, the other in orange. The girl in baby blue carried a pink and black bundle under her arm and a black pair of boots.

"Hey guys, this is Charlotte." Harper introduced me. "This is Harriett, Jessie, Connor, Bubba and Dean. Don't worry about memorizing names, though, they answer to anything." Harper joked with me. "Are those the clothes for her?" He motioned towards the bundle under Harriett's arm.

"Yeah, come with me, you can change in the house before we go. You guys can go get the chopper ready. We will be right back." Harriett said as she and Jessie headed me into the house.

The clothes fit, and the girls were very nice, I wondered how old they were and if I would be going to school with them.

"It fits perfect." Harper said as the other boys looked up at me as we walked into a large machine shed behind the house. It took me a second to realize he meant my outfit.

I was barely paying attention anymore when I noticed the huge helicopter sitting in the middle of the shed. "What is that for?" I asked, stunned.

Kaisen said, "This is what we are riding in up to the dunes, we can't drive to where we are going."

"Well, we could but I don't think you want to ride in a dune buggy for two hours." A boy in silver added. I think his name is Connor.

We finally got up into the air, we only flew for about twenty minutes when Kaisen, Dean, Bubba, and Harriett stood up and grab their snowboards and helmets. They started to strap their snowboards to their boots and went over to the door of the chopper.

"What are they doing?" I asked Jessie, who was sitting next to me.

"Just watch, it's really cool." She smiled at me.

Just as we started to get closer to the ground, I realized what they were about to do. We were probably eight feet in the air when Bubba threw open the door, and before I could stop him, Bubba jumped from the moving helicopter.

"Oh my... I can't believe he just did that." I exclaimed in horror.

Next, Dean jumped then Harriett, and finally I watched as Kaisen leaped into the air and landed on the sandy waves. My heart tried to jump out of my chest as I watched them all. They got smaller and smaller as I noticed we were flying away, leaving them alone in the desert.

"Where are we going?"

"We are going to get the buggies. Can you drive?" Jessie asked.

"I have never driven one before but I could try." I said, half breathing and half gasping. We got to the buggies and a small shack in the middle of nowhere ten minutes later.

"Just follow me," Harper said right before he took off in one of the buggies. I followed as best I could, through the sand and over the steep dunes. I had to go fast, which I wasn't very good at, but we eventually reach the others. They were sitting on the bottom of one of the dunes, when we got there.

"What took so long?" Bubba asked us. No one answered.

"Ready to race?" Dean asked as the boys smiled. "I'll take the green buggy with Bubba. Kaisen and Harper can go in the blue one, Jessie and Harriett can take the yellow and Connor can take Charlotte in the Orange."

"Hey, wait a minute, that's not fair you always take Bubba and the green buggy. I'll take Bubba and the green buggy and you can take Jessie." Harriett complained.

"Okay, fine." Dean started. "You can take the green one, but I want blue and I want to go with Harper."

Kaisen stepped in to break up the quarrel quickly. "Stop! Dean and Harper in the blue, Bubba and Harriett in the green, the twins in yellow and I'll take Charlotte in the orange. Same course as normal, you know the rules, and it doesn't matter what color you get because I'm going to win."

"As long as you don't cheat," Dean said, "You're going to eat the sand from my tires."

Somehow everyone agreed to that arrangement and I felt scared but satisfied that I got to ride with Kaisen. He seemed like the safest driver out of all of them.

"Why does it matter what color buggy everyone gets?" I asked Kaisen as we started towards our orange buggy.

"Everyone thinks the green one is fastest, because the person who wins usually drives the green one." Kaisen started. "I usually drive the green one, and I usually win." His smile was intoxicating. I smiled back at him before jumping into the passenger seat and strapping myself in.

We started the race in the back next to Bubba and Harriet in the green buggy, but we weren't in the back for long. Kaisen drove like a pro racer, drifting in and out of the other buggies and got out in front and lead the rest up and over the piles of sand through the invisible race track. The wind flew in my face as we went around sharp turns. A couple of times, I could have sworn the buggy was riding on two wheels. The ride was fast and exhilarating even though I was deathly afraid of going fast and was paranoid of getting into a wreck. I tried not to worry about the steep vertical drops and the sharp curves in our path. I loved every minute and I felt safe no matter how dangerously close we were to tipping over. The wind picked up speed as we did and the sand got thicker in the air. I could tell we were nearing the finish because we picked up speed, I couldn't see behind me but I assumed the other buggies were right behind us. I could see a long stretch of flat ground as we barreled over a hill. We came off the hill with a lot of speed and curved around the last mound of sand drifting on what seemed again to be two wheels. I held on tight to the bars on each side of my seat. Kaisen whipped the buggy towards the straight away. I eased myself towards Kaisen a little bit trying to read the speedometer. If I could see correctly, we were going 85 milesper-hour. We past the only tree I noticed in the whole race and slowed guickly. I knew then we had won the race. Shortly after

we slowed and came to a stop I saw the blue buggy follow behind us.

"Jeeze, Kaisen, you're a lead foot." Dean complained. "You could at least have let us believe we were catching up to you."

The yellow buggy flew up barely slowing and stopped. Jessie pulled off her helmet and goggles in one swift movement and motioned for us. "Harriet and Bubba flipped in the last curve." Jessie said in an unconcerned voice.

Dean and Kaisen jumped on the back of the yellow buggy right away and they rode off towards the green buggy.

"Hey, get in." Harper called to me. We got into the blue buggy and followed the others. When we got there Kaisen, Dean, and Connor were lifting the buggy back onto its wheels. It looked like they rolled once and landed on Bubba's side. I was terrified someone was hurt, but no one else seemed concerned. When the wheels were back on the ground Bubba and Harriett both climbed out of the buggy.

"Maybe I should stick to the green buggy. I at least can get out of it if I tip." Kaisen joked.

"We wouldn't have tipped but tubby over here thinks it's alright to whip the sucker full speed around the outside of the normal path." Harriett complained about Bubba's driving. Bubba was a pretty big guy. He was like a huge teddy bear and looked like he couldn't hurt a fly. He reminded me of one of those large Hawaiian guys you see in the movies. He had the dark complexion and black spiky hair that matched perfect.

"Oh, Harriett you're just mad we came in last." Bubba said back. He ignored her after that; he turned to the rest of us. "I'm hungry, let's eat?" Everyone laughed.

"We just got here." Harper said.

"Round two?" Connor asked.

"Green!" Jessie exclaimed.

"Kaisen!" Harriett cried.

"Orange" Dean said.

"It's not the buggy that wins, it's the driver." Kaisen said. "You guys can give me any color buggy and any partner but I'll still win."

"Okay then, you can have Bubba and the orange kart, I'll take Charlotte and the green, and everyone else can keep same riders." Harriett challenged.

"No problem." Kaisen agreed.

This time, I didn't feel as safe. I wasn't sure if it was because I didn't know Harriett or because she was tinier then me and didn't seem like she would be able to keep the large kart upright. I held on tight and let the wind and sand whip along my clothes. I think I was getting sand in the collar of my gear. I watched as the blue kart sped past and then orange flew past at almost twice the speed, then it passed the blue buggy and kept going. The farther we raced the faster we got and the sharper the turns became. Then, without any warning, our buggy was jolted forward by a powerful force from behind. The kart started sliding sideways, throwing lots of sand against my goggles, making it impossible to see. I was terrified at first but then Harriett grabbed my wrist, which made me feel very calm and secure, with one hand and a handle on the roll cage with the

other. She hollered what sounded like hold on tight. I was already holding on as tight as I could when the buggy rolled onto Harriett's side then kept going, rolling all the way over and still rolling. My instinct was to close my eyes, but I just sat there and watched as my head started to spin. We finally came to a stop after doing three complete barrels; the kart landed back on its wheels, and I gasped for air, not realizing I had been holding my breath.

"Are you alright?" Harriett asked looking over to me as she shook my wrist she was still holding on to.

"Yeah, are you?"

"Yep, that was fun," She added with a laugh. At first I thought she was crazy but I thought about what just happened and it was fun, it didn't hurt at all. I smiled back at her as she released my hand and pushed on the gas. We lost the race, but rolling was much more exciting. We switched teams up and raced a few more times.

"Don't tell Marilyn you rolled in the buggy, she will be mad we weren't more careful with you the first time we took you somewhere." Kaisen said with a breath taking smile.

"I won't tell. And thanks for inviting me; I had a lot of fun." I smiled back at him.

After getting the buggies rounded up and put back where they belong, the helicopter flew us back to the Darby's house, where we ate turkey sandwiches and talked about our trip to Grufon Dunes. I finally felt like I fit in. Everyone was nice to me, I was even invited to come back and hang out any time I wanted to, and I couldn't wait to see what other things they did for fun here. Even though we only played at Grufon Dunes for

an hour and a half, I was wiped out. I slept in the car on the way back to David's house.

"Hey guys, did you have fun?" Marilyn greeted us as we walked into the front door.

"Yeah, I came in second to Kaisen every time but other than that it was great." Harper told her.

"Kaisen you should let someone else win for a change. Just because you can win doesn't always mean you should." Marilyn told him.

"That makes no sense." Kaisen grinned.

"Just give someone else a chance next time, alright. You win too much." Marilyn asked in a sharp but polite way.

"Yes, mother." Kaisen tried to look gloomy.

I really just wanted to curl up with a good book and lay in bed. So that's what I did. I went to the library. I looked for a book with an uninteresting cover, then read the back or inside cover of the book to see what it was about. I did this for several minutes until I came across a small bright green book. It looked old and it was the date on the inside said 1945. I read the first page and it seemed interesting enough to keep my attention for a couple hours until dinner time. I walked back to my room, just before I got to my door, Kaisen and Harper rounded the corner and started walking towards me, to their rooms, I assumed. Harper was still in his motocross outfit but Kaisen was wearing something similar to me, a pair of sweat pants and a t-shirt.

"Gonna take a nap before dinner?" Harper asked me, as he eyed my outfit.

"No, just going to read for a little while." I said as I held my book up for them to see it.

Noël Marzën

"Oh, okay, we'll see you later then." Harper said.

"Yep... oh and thanks for taking me with you guys today. I had a lot of fun." I added.

"Good. You can come with us any time." Harper beamed.

"Thanks." I said as I glanced at Kaisen's face just before I disappeared into my room. I don't remember falling asleep, but when I opened my eyes my book was lying open on my chest and my clock read six twenty four. Someone would be up to get me soon; dinner always starts at six thirty.

The week went by fast, too fast. Harper, Kaisen and I hung out every day this week. We played board games, video games and watched movies. They even had Jessie and Connor Darby over for a camp fire one evening. Kaisen was getting ready to go back to college and we only had two weeks left until school started. This whole summer went by too quickly.



After her mother dies, Charlotte goes to live with her father and step-family in Europe. Charlotte quickly uncovers a fantastical country called Andeka, of which her father is a ruler. While learning about her unknown heritage, Charlotte unwittingly falls in love with her step-brother, Kaisen. As Charlotte fights for her kingdom and her family, Kaisen and Charlotte try to keep their love a secret. However, every secret, no matter how scandalous, is eventually revealed.

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