Almost invisible in the night, Carter crouched low behind a soft, protective veil of tall ferns. His eyes, familiar with the darkness, swept the landscape with professional suspicion.

He couldn't see the others easily but he could find them if he needed to. A hedge moved against the breeze. A tree trunk failed to hide an expanse of pale leg.

They weren't really trying to hide. All around him he could hear the hiss of whispers and the repressed giggles as his entire class waiting for the signal to drop their clothes and jump into cold water.

He sighed, rocking back on his heels, arms crossed.

The Summer Splash. Was there anything more ridiculous at Cimmeria Academy? Anything more juvenile and idiotic?

Lips tight, he shook his head as if there might be someone near enough to see his disapproval. To know he was not voluntarily a part of this teenage lunacy.

I should be in my room, he thought. Sleeping or reading. Anything but this.

And yet, here he was, contemplating joining in. All because he knew she was here.

Somewhere in the darkness, Allie was hiding.

He knew she didn't want to be here any more than he did. He'd seen the expression on her face when Jo explained the rules of the game. First she'd looked aghast. And then, when she saw Jo's enthusiasm, resigned.

Peer pressure, he thought, looking with accusing eyes at the hiding places surrounding him. That was the problem. Half the people hiding right now wouldn't be here at all were it not for their friends making them do it.

Who in their right mind, would think this was a good idea? He wondered. 'Hey, I'm not insecure enough in my day-to-day school life. I think I'll stand naked in front of the entire school tonight. For kicks.'

His expression was a silent condemnation of the absurdity of such a statement. He'd always avoided the summer splash. Sneering to himself as the others sneaked out on the same night every year to skinny-dip en masse.

But tonight, he'd climbed out of bed and crept down one of the old servants' staircases, making his way through the silent hallways of the school's Gothic mansion, fully aware that dozens of others would be doing the same thing, all to come stand here in the dark

His stomach was tight with nervousness. He still hadn't yet decided whether he'd join in.

He really didn't want to join in.

Sod it. What the hell am I even doing here? he asked himself.

That was the question of the hour. Was he here to help Allie if something went wrong? Or because he hoped to see her naked?

At the thought, heat rose to his face.

Little of both I guess.

He pounded his fist quietly against the soft earth at his feet.

God, he was such a glutton for punishment. Why was he doing this to himself? She didn't fancy him. She'd made that very clear. And that was just fine with him.

Anyone who'd voluntarily go out with that arrogant, self-obsessed tosser, Sylvain Cassel…

Somewhere in the darkness someone snickered openly.

Carter's gaze snapped towards the sound with sudden alertness. Nothing moved. He couldn't be certain where the laugh had originated. Sound carried oddly over water.

When nothing else happened, he relaxed again, letting his thoughts return to the subject that seemed to occupy his mind too much lately.

Why did Allie like Sylvain?

Fine, he was good looking. If you liked cheekbones and blue eyes...

But he was also a wanker. Everyone knew it. He was spoiled and rude, and far too aware of his own bone structure.

Shouldn't that matter to her? Couldn't she see it?

But he'd seen the look on Allie's face when Sylvain turned on the French charm. When he smiled that hundred-watt smile.

She was dazzled.

Carter couldn't understand her. She was obviously street smart. She should be able to see through Sylvain's act. To his messed up soul.

He sighed.

Jo didn't help, of course. Fluffy, silly Jo. 'Let's all have boyfriends together. Ours can both be shallow-with-muscles. Hooray!'

He'd been crouching too long, and his legs were starting to go numb. He shifted position, dropping onto one knee, his movements as silent and sure as a cat's. Now he could rest his elbow on his thigh and prop his chin on his hand as he waited for something to happen.

But the night seemed quieter than ever. His thoughts returned to the problem at hand.

When he really stopped to think about it, the real question was: Why did he care?

If he didn't fancy Allie – and he didn't – why did he care who she went out with? Why did it bother him that she chose Sylvain?

He didn't know the answer to that question.

There was something about her. The way she wore too much makeup sometimes and looked like she didn't care what anyone thought. The way she ran with the wind in her hair. The way Katie and her clique picked on her. And the way she always fought back. Fists curled at her sides, ready to swing. To take on anyone.

She was fierce.

And something about that felt… familiar. Like he just knew her. Like they were

the same.

The fire inside him was drawn to the fire inside her.

Swallowing hard, he let that thought evaporate.

What is wrong with me tonight?

In the distance the pond was still. Its surface glittered like black glass. The marsh hens and ducks that paddled across it by day were all asleep; unaware their rest was about to be disturbed by a school of teenage lunatics.

Across the water he could just make out the old cottage, so overgrown with vines it barely seemed to have walls. Isabelle always talked about fixing it up but year after year went by and nothing happened….

Suddenly, from somewhere very nearby, a deep male voice split the silence.

'It's time, kids. Drop trou.'

The giggles and whispers rose to a chorus. He could hear the rustling as the students, still in the safety of their hiding places, disrobed.

Despite himself, Carter's heart thumped.

They were really going to do this.

Doubtful, he glanced down at his own shorts and t-shirt. Hiding here and watching everyone else run around naked would be kind of creepy. He had to either join in or leave.

For a long second he hesitated.

'God's sake,' he muttered to himself. He pulled his shirt over his head in a single quick movement. His skin seemed unnaturally pale in the darkness, and he glanced down at it with sudden doubt.

Night School training had left his body muscled and lean, but still.

He didn't like parading around in front of…

'Now.'

The command seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at once. It was irresistible. Irrefutable. You were either in this thing now or you were out of it.

He heard the first feet pounding on the shore. The first shrieks and then, seconds later, the first splash as bodies hit the water.

Screams of laughter.

His fingers suddenly numb, he fumbled with the buttons on his trousers, dropping them and his underwear in a single movement, and kicking off his shoes.

More screams and splashing.

The night was warm but Carter shivered anyway as he stepped out from behind the waist-high ferns into a bizarre scene of naked bodies hurtling through the dark woods, like one of those old Italian movies.

Before he could decide what to do next, three girls ran by him.

It was Allie, Jo and Lisa.

In the dark madness of the night, they never saw him.

Carter drew in his breath as he watched their flight, their hair streaming behind

them. They held hands as they sped towards the water.

Jo was laughing wildly. Lisa's smile was stiff and nervous.

But Allie's face held a look of grim determination. Like this was another test she had to pass.

Her skin was like milk.

At the edge of the pond they leaped into the air. Jo giggled shrilly. And they disappeared beneath the black water.

For a long moment, Carter couldn't seem to move.

Then someone punched his shoulder roughly, jarring him from his reverie.

'Come on, dude. Don't stand there till your dick falls off. Get going.'

Carter whirled to find Lucas grinning at him.

'Race you,' Lucas said, ducking as Carter swung a fist at him half-heartedly. Feinting left, he ran to the water's edge, jumping in with a hoarse cry.

Carter followed and prepared to jump in after him.

That was when he noticed her.

Alone in the water, flailing and sputtering, Allie looked terrified. Gasping for breath.

She was going under.

Oh, sodding hell, Carter realised with sudden icy clarity. She doesn't knowhow to swim

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Carter's dive was surgical, a clean arc that left barely a ripple in his wake. Breaking the surface, he swam towards her with efficient, strong strokes, reaching her side just as she disappeared again beneath the waves.

Reaching down into the dark water, he caught her upper arms, yanking her roughly from the depths.

Her skin was cold and slippery, and he had to hold on tight in order not to lose his hold.

She emerged, water streaming from her dark hair, which hung down long enough to cover her shoulders but not her breasts.

She stared at him, wheezing desperately. Hands struggling to cover herself. He saw panic and embarrassment duelling for supremacy in her eyes. And he saw that – even in the open air – she couldn't breathe.

Her lips were a pale, unnatural blue

Adrenaline rushed into Carter's veins.

He knew a panic attack when he saw one – he'd had them himself. He knew all too well the terrifying sensation of suffocation – the sense that all the oxygen had been drawn from the world, leaving none behind for him.

Kicking steadily to keep them both afloat, Carter tried to force her to meet his gaze.

'You're okay, Allie. Look at me.' He kept his voice was calm and authoritative,

his eyes locked on hers. 'Breathe slowly through your nose.'

Allie thrashed in his grip and he shook his head sternly. 'Don't look away.' Her frightened grey eyes darted back to his. 'Keep your eyes on me. Breathe slowly.'

Wheezing audibly, she shook her head so violently cold water sprayed across his cheeks. She couldn't do it.

For the first time, Carter wondered if this wasn't a more serious situation than he'd thought. In the moonlight her face looked drained of colour. Her eyes were glassy.

He fought to stay calm. To keep his voice steady.

'Breathe in through your nose like this,' he said, demonstrating. 'And now out.' He blew air out through his lips, forcefully.

She tried to do as he said – fighting for air, her eyes locked on his. But he could see it didn't work.

Carter was shaken. He should have called for help earlier. He'd never seen anyone have a panic attack this bad. He hadn't even known it was possible.

Then, to his horror, her eyelids fluttered shut, and her body went limp. She wasn't breathing.

There wasn't time to think. Holding her tight with one arm, he raised his free hand and slapped her cheek, hard.

It physically hurt him to do it. Her skin was like butter beneath the roughness of his hand. He felt like a monster.

Her eyes shot open. She took a sharp reflexive breath.

Carter's heart leaped.

'You can do this, Allie,' he said, believing it now. Willing her to believe. 'Breathe with me.'

He took a deep breath, relief warming him when she tried to do the same, her gaze still locked on his, like he was the only person in the world.

'Good!' he said. 'Again.'

She took a deeper breath this time, and he could tell the panic was abating as oxygen filled her lungs, entering her blood stream. Her lips flushed with red. 'Again.'

He'd been so focused on her breathing he hadn't noticed she was trembling until, on the fourth successful breath, she burst into tears

'Carter…' she whispered brokenly.

That word told him everything. How embarrassed she was. How frightened.

He knew just what that felt like. Knew it far too well.

He didn't even think about what to do next. Without a word, he pulled her into his arms.

He would never have dreamed of doing this ordinarily. But there was nothing ordinary about this situation.

He wondered if she'd reject his touch.

Instead, her arms tightened around his neck as she clung to him.

Just for a moment, he didn't think about her body pressed against his. Or about the fact that they were both naked and vulnerable.

He thought about protecting her. It was all he wanted. And he didn't know why he wanted it.

'You're Ok, Allie,' he whispered. 'Just keep breathing.'

All around them the laughter and splashing continued unabated. To the others, they must have looked like just another couple.

Still. He had to get her out of here.

But she seemed too stunned to make her own way. With one arm around her waist, he half-carried her to the shore.

Once they were on land, though, he stood uncertainly in the soft mud. They couldn't go back to the school like this.

'Where are your clothes?' he asked.

Here, in the open, he had to try very hard not to look at her. Allie, her arms crossed in front of her chest, was doing the same. Each of them stared just past the other's bare shoulder.

'I don't know,' she admitted, shivering. 'I can't remember where we left everything. It all just looks like... trees.'

'Right,' he said. 'Plan B.' He looked around, deciding what to do. 'Stay here. I'll find something for you to wear.'

Hurriedly, she turned to hide behind a cluster of trees. As she did, he glimpsed the pale curve of her hips. Long, smooth thighs

It took all his strength to tear his gaze away.

Focus, Carter, he ordered himself. Be a good guy.

Taking a deep breath, he turned and headed into the forest, looking in the most obvious hiding places. Discarded clothing lay everywhere and he grabbed whatever looked useful.

Stones and pine cones bit into his bare feet like little knives as he hurried back to where he'd left his own clothing, pulling on his shorts and stuffing his sandy feet into his shoes. Then, still shirtless, he headed back to the cluster of trees. The night air was cool against his bare shoulders.

At first he couldn't see her in the darkness, but then he nearly ran right into her. Suddenly it was impossible to avoid seeing her - pale skin, curves, long dark hair. Grey, tormented eyes.

His heart stuttered.

He didn't trust himself to speak. Averting his gaze, he held out his own shirt and a pair of girl's shorts.

He hoped she couldn't see him well in the dark; his face was burning.

She grabbed the clothes from his hand and turned away. He could see her from the corner of his eye, bending to pull on the shorts.

The smooth line of her bare back was the most perfect thing he'd ever seen.

She fumbled with his t-shirt before she managed to yank it over her head.

An awkward silence fell. Carter cleared his throat to break it.

'Ready?' The word came out low. But reassuringly steady.

She nodded, eyes shining in the moonlight.

Cautiously, he held out his hand. She would swat it away, he thought. Or give him a withering look.

But, instead, she took it without hesitation. Almost eagerly. As if she was glad he'd offered it.

Excitement flooded his veins with the dizzying force of a drug.

Something had changed between them tonight. For the first time, she trusted him.

And for the first time he was willing to admit he wanted her. In his life.

In his clothes.

They walked across the forest towards the footpath, Allie picking her way carefully, feet still bare. He hadn't been able to find shoes to fit her.

They were leaving the lake now, the squeals and laughter of the summer splash fading with each step. After a few minutes, the only sound they could hear was their own breathing.

Carter relaxed a little. They'd done it. They'd escaped without anyone noticing.

When they reached the main path back to the school, Allie's steps slowed. She tugged at his hand until he stopped and looked down at her.

'Carter... I just wanted to…' She hesitated, her eyes searching his face. '… thank you. You saved my life.'

Reluctantly, he let go of her hand.

'It was nothing,' he lied.

He knew it was the right thing to say. He had to pretend this was no big deal. He couldn't tell her the truth.

If she'd just let it go – let him get away with that small falsehood – maybe things would have been different. Maybe they could have kept pretending.

But she didn't.

'No, Carter.' She grabbed his hand again, gripping it tightly.

Her gaze was so intense, the air left his lungs as he met it.

'It was something,' she said.

Goosebumps ran across Carter's back. He stood very still. The moment seemed frozen in time. She'd nearly died tonight. They'd got through it together.

Everything was different now.

He longed to touch her cheek; to feel her skin, soft against his fingertips. He wanted to tell her he'd never felt closer to anyone than he felt to her right now. He wanted to tell her how beautiful she was. How strong.

He wanted to tell her the truth. Something in her expression told him she wanted to hear it.

But before he could summon the courage to say any of it, a voice broke the

spell.

'Allie!'

Jo raced up the path towards them. Gabe and Lisa were right behind her.

Allie turned towards them. As she did, her hand slipped free from Carter's hold. Jo grabbed Allie by the shoulders and gave her a worried shake. 'Where have you been? Are you Ok? I looked for you everywhere.'

Flushing guiltily, Allie started to explain, but Carter didn't wait to hear. He didn't want to see Jo shooting him an accusing look. Or have Gabe remind him, in that superior way of his, that Allie was Sylvain's girlfriend.

This was what was real. Not that moment with Allie's hand in his. And that look in her eyes.

That was imaginary. He had to remember that.

And so, when no one was looking, Carter stepped back, and disappeared into the night.