

Carter shut his bedroom window with a thump. He needed to concentrate – with everything that had been happening lately, he was miles behind on his class work. If he didn't catch up Zelazny would give him detention again. But it was after eleven and he'd only just now finished his essay on the War of the Roses.

There was so much left to do,

As he turned with weary resignation to his science assignment the words swam on the page. Rubbing his eyes, he picked up his pen and frowned at the book in front of him. He was writing the first answer onto a clean sheet of paper when something – a tiny movement, or a subtle change in the light – made him look up.

A face – made unnaturally pale by the darkness – stared back at him where nothing should be but sky.

With a startled cry he hurtled himself out of his chair and stumbled backward so fast his chair crashed to the floor.

Clinging to the window frame, Allie watched all this with obvious amusement.

In one quick glance he took in the smooth lines of her oval face and her dark hair swirling in the breeze as she stood on the ledge outside his second-floor window. Her white cotton blouse hung loose from the skirt of her uniform. Her lips curled up at the corners, the way they always did when she was about to laugh at him.

Trying to look cool, he strode back over and unlatched the window.

“What the hell...?”

“I can't sleep,” she whispered. “Want to come out and play?”

Her words made his heart trip but he kept his expression cynical. “You're mad. Get inside before you kill yourself.”

As she ducked down to climb through the arched, shutter-style window, her short pleated skirt fluttered against her thighs. He pretended not to notice.

“Katie is such a *bitch*,” she complained as she clambered across his desk.

Uh-oh. “No argument.”

As she told him what had happened that day she paced his room like a panther in a cage. Watching her, Carter frowned. She was a bundle of nerves. Her hands flew as she gesticulated and her shoes squeaked against the wood floor when she pivoted. Her voice was rich with righteous indignation and hurt.

When she described how Sylvain had intervened that morning with Katie and her friends, his muscles tensed. His hands curled into fists at his side.

What is it with sodding Sylvain? Why is he always in the right place when she needs someone? How does he always manage to be the one?

Suddenly he was as stressed out as Allie. It felt weird to care so much.

If Carter were perfectly honest, he hadn't really liked her at first. He thought she knew more than she let on – that she was working some angle – a new girl pretending to be ordinary so she could get attention. A faker. But, over time, he'd started to believe she was who she said she was. Everything at Cimmeria seemed to blindside her. She did everything wrong. And her innocence made her vulnerable. So Katie and her friends bullied her and for a long time he'd thought Sylvain was doing the same. But now he wasn't certain.

It wasn't like Sylvain to be so persistent.

But lately his own feelings for her were confused. When she smiled at him his heart jumped. When she laughed at his jokes his whole day improved. He tried not to look at her amazing legs... Well. At least she'd never seen him looking.

The only problem was... They were friends. And if they became something else it would ruin their friendship forever. He wouldn't let that happen.

But she was looking up at him now, blinking those grey eyes that seemed to miss nothing; waiting for him to comment on all that had transpired on her first day as "School Murderer".

"Look," he said, "It seems to me there are only two possibilities. Either Katie didn't spread the first rumour and she's just taking advantage of it, or she *did* spread the first rumour and this is all part of her evil plan to get to you. Make people hate you."

She flinched a little at that.

"I think it's the latter," he concluded.

"What should we do?" she asked.

Without asking permission, she sat down on the edge of his bed looking as comfortable as if she were in her own room. With a sigh, she stretched out her legs.

He wished she wouldn't do that.

"The rumours are intended to cause the most damage possible. This feels like a campaign to get rid of you."

Her cheeks flushed an angry red as she leaned forward. "Ok, Carter. Enough with secrecy and all that bollocks. It's time. Tell me about this place."

He didn't even have to think about it – he crossed his arms and set his jaw. "Allie you know I can't...."

"Uh-uh," she cut him off. "Not this time. Someone *died*. For all I know, whoever killed Ruth could go after me next. You know things. You are allegedly my friend. You have to tell me."

When she got angry she had this way of tilting up her chin that was both adorable and threatening – she was doing it right now.

“I can’t. If I did – and if anybody ever found out...” He shook his head. “I just can’t – trust me.”

“How can I trust you if you won’t tell me the truth?” Under her breath she added, “Maybe I should just go ask Sylvain...”

That was too much.

The rush of anger and frustration left him seething. He stalked over to where she sat and leaned over her. He knew it was intimidating. He wanted to intimidate her. She needed to stop seeing Sylvain as an option – he wasn’t good for her.

“Do you want to know what you mean to Sylvain? Well I’ll tell you. Every year he picks a pretty new first-year girl, shags her and dumps her. It’s his thing.” So he was exaggerating; Sylvain didn’t *exactly* do that. But he came close to it. And she needed to stay away from him. “Each one thinks she’s so special. That’s who you are to him, Allie. His newest, naive conquest.”

“Stop it!” The colour drained from her cheeks and she shoved him hard, jumping to her feet. “If that’s true, why didn’t you ever tell me before, Carter?”

She stood right in front of him; practically touching him. Searching his face as if she could find all the answers there.

His tongue seemed paralysed in his mouth as he stuttered. “I... I... I tried.”

But she wasn’t letting him off that easily. “People say you’re into one-night stands. So... How are you any different than Sylvain?”

That stung. “Are these the same people who say you killed Ruth?”

“Whatever.” She tilted her head to one side. Judging him. “Is what they say about you a lie?”

What could he say? Yes... and no. His thoughts flickered back to Clare’s tear-stained face after he broke up with her last term. The way her friends had circled her as if to protect her from him.

“Yes, Allie,” he said with more confidence than he felt. “It’s a lie. Or at least an exaggeration. Look. I got this... I guess, reputation ... because if I go out with someone and I can tell they’re not the right one for me I break up with them right away. I don’t want to hurt anybody, Allie. I really don’t. It’s just, sometimes...”

His voice trailed off. *God, I sound so lame.*

A long moment passed as she held his gaze. He waited for her to laugh, or shake her head in disgust. But she didn’t move. She was so close he could see the tiny flecks of dark blue in the grey of her eyes, and the way her dark eyelashes curled up at the very ends.

Then, to his surprise, she held up her hand.

“Ok.” Her voice was soft – her words like feathers against his skin. “I believe you.”

Her light scent danced on the air between them. For a second he closed his eyes – breathed it in. Why was she standing so *close*?

Walk away, Carter, he told himself. *Don’t mess this up.*

Instead, as if someone else controlled his body, he pressed his palm against hers. The warmth of her skin startled him like an electric charge.

“Thank you,” he heard himself say.

Shut up, Carter, he thought frantically.

“For what?” Her voice sounded small.

“For believing me.”

Her lips quirked up and his eyes were drawn to them. The muscles in his throat constricted.

His fingers entwined with hers.

This is such a bad idea...

He said something – he wasn’t sure what. Just anything that would keep her here, holding his hand.

She said something back but all he could hear was the roar of blood rushing through his veins as he pulled her towards him – now she was so close he could feel her breath soft and warm against his face. She smelled like peppermint and honeysuckle. It made him dizzy.

From here, kissing her was easy – all he had to do was lean forward.

When his lips touched hers she gave a little gasp of surprise. For a second he was so certain she’d pull away he almost let go of her. But then she reached her hands up to his neck and pulled him closer.

Relief flooded over him like cool water as he tightened his arms around her shoulders.

“I’ve waited so long for this,” he whispered.

In reply, her lips parted and she pressed her fingertips hard into the muscles of his back. He tasted the faint salt of her mouth against his tongue as his hands knotted in the fabric of her uniform. He crushed her in his arms.

She was so warm – his body felt hot wherever it touched her. Carter’s head swam as he clung to her. He wanted to pull her so close she could never escape. He wanted to feel her body pressed against his forever.

Slipping his lips across her jaw to her neck, he moved downy tendrils of hair aside to reach the skin behind her ear. When he pressed his teeth against the tender flesh of her earlobe she made a soft sound and his entire body responded – his breath shortened and his heart thudded as if it were trying to escape from his chest.

She was so soft against his body. Soft but strong and eager – her fingers tangled in his hair as she pulled his mouth back to hers. He could get lost in this so easily. Lost in her. Forget about all the awful things that had happened and just think about *this*. Nobody knew they were together. Nobody was going to walk in on them. And something told him that for whatever reason – maybe for all the wrong reasons – she wasn't going to be the one to step back.

But one thing held him back: This was Allie.

He had to be careful. It would be so easy to screw things up now. To go too far and ruin it all. To lose her.

To lose everything.

Cupping her face in his hands, he kissed her one last time. Then, regretfully, he extracted himself from her arms and backed up until he leaned against the cool wall by the door, where he tried to calm his rapid breathing and stop himself from running back to scoop her up and carry her to his bed, which was *right there*.

She stayed frozen where he'd left her, her worried gaze locked on his.

He held out his hands. "I hate to do the grown-up thing, but..."

What had happened between them seemed to have lowered her defences – for a brief moment her every emotion was written clearly on her face. At first she looked confused. Then colour stained her cheeks and he knew she was embarrassed.

Holding her gaze steadily, he waited for her to understand that he wasn't rejecting her. He knew she would. She could always read him like a book.

And after a long second she did. Then she smiled a knowing smile so beautiful she seemed to glow.

"So," she said. "There's that."