

'Where the bloody hell is that shoe? Waste of sodding time ...'

Grumbling to himself, Carter crouched down to search the back of his wardrobe, throwing out trainers, boots and a scarf he didn't recognise before finally emerging a minute later, black dress shoes firmly in one hand.

His tuxedo jacket hung from the back of the wardrobe door, black as his mood.

The idea of going to the winter ball right now, given all that was happening, seemed patently absurd. Isabelle should have cancelled it.

The possibility of some sort of an attack was too high. And after what happened at the summer ball ...

He sighed. The party was happening and there was no getting out of it.

He dressed quickly, clipping the cuffs of his crisp, white shirt with the cufflinks Bob Ellison had given to him on his sixteenth birthday – or rather, passed on. Made of silver with a faceted garnet stone at the centre, they'd once belonged to his father. But Carter had long since given up examining the cold metal for any connection to his dead parents. There was nothing there.

They were just cufflinks.

He stood in front of the mirror, knotting his black tie with the expert ease of familiarity. For a moment he studied himself, seeing the irritation in his dark eyes. The tight set of his full mouth.

He clenched and unclenched his hands, trying to force himself to relax.

It was nearly nine o'clock. He'd put this off for as long as he could.

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The sound of the party hit him at the top of the stairs. In the great hall, a string orchestra played a lively waltz. The roar of conversation rose above the music like a wave cresting over a beach.

Squaring his shoulders, Carter walked into the crowds.

He would show his face, hang out with Jules for a bit then leave when no one was looking. That was enough.

The ground floor was packed with elegantly dressed strangers and Carter struggled to make his way through them, forcing a polite smile.

A familiar voice broke above the others and he saw Jules, reaching out through the crush of people.

'Carter's trapped! I will rescue him,' she announced, grabbing his hand and pulling him through to where she stood talking to Katie and some of her vile acolytes.

Katie cast a bored smile his way. She looked white as milk in a dark green dress that clung to her figure but he barely noticed her. Because Jules looked *incredible*.

Her black, silk dress slid over her body like dark water. A slit from the ankle to the thigh exposed one muscular leg. Her silky blonde hair just brushed the very tops of her mostly bare shoulders.

'Blimey, Jules. You look fantastic,' he said, trying not to stare.

She blushed. 'You scrub up pretty well yourself, Carter.'

Her words slurred slightly. He could smell the wine on her breath. His lips quirked up. 'Why Miss Matheson. Have you been drinking?'

'Only champagne.' She blinked. 'That doesn't count ... Does it?'

'Not if I have some.' He lifted two glasses from a passing tray held aloft by a hassled looking waiter and handed one to her. 'If we must be here, the least we can do is get drunk.'

'Intoxicated is the correct term.' Katie took a sip from her glass and eyed a couple of glamorous looking adults nearby. 'Drunk is what ordinary people get.'

'And we're not ordinary ...' her friend Ismay snickered next to her.

Recognising the couple Katie was watching as Sylvain's parents, Carter shot her a bilious look. Jules didn't miss his expression.

'Shall we dance?' She tilted her head to one side and looked at him thoughtfully as if merely considering this possibility. Then she made up her mind. 'Yes. We shall.'

Without waiting for his response, she pulled him to the edge of the crowded dance floor. Carter, who didn't want to dance but also didn't want to talk to Katie, upended his champagne glass, downing its contents. Jules did the same.

Setting their glasses on a nearby table, Carter turned to her, taking her hand in his, and resting his other hand on her waist. She was more muscular than Allie, he noticed. And taller.

He winced. He really needed to stop comparing them.

Setting his mouth in a determined line he pulled her closer. They swirled into the crowd.

They'd known each other since they were eleven. They'd learned to fight together. To dance together. And it showed. Jules seemed to anticipate his every move. She let him lead without question or challenge. Having never done it, he imagined dancing with Allie would be very different.

She'd never let anyone lead.

Mentally he shook himself. *I have got to stop thinking about her.*

As they spun across the floor in perfect sync and he pulled her closer, flattening his hand against the small of her back. Beneath his fingers she moved with sinuous ease.

Her gaze held his as if she willed him to think only of her. The way her body pressed against his made it hard to think about anything else.

Carter swallowed hard. He'd never thought of Jules as anything but a friend. Tonight, though, everything seemed different. *She* seemed different.

She was openly flirting with him, for one thing.

When the song finished she raised her lips to his ear. 'Let's get more champagne.'

Her words seemed to run from his head down his spine.

He looked into her dark blue eyes. Maybe he *could* forget Allie.

She led him to the edge of the dance floor, waving over a waiter bearing a tray full of champagne glasses. Selecting two, she handed one to Carter.

He knew he should pace himself but the cold, effervescent wine was welcome. The room was stuffy. Over-heated.

Jules took a deep drink then turned to face him. She was standing very close and her breast brushed his arm.

Just for a second, he wondered if she'd done it on purpose.

'I'm so glad I don't have to wear a jacket like boys do.' Her voice was husky. 'It must be so hot.'

Somehow, his glass of champagne was empty again. *When did that happen?*

His hand, of its own accord, ran down her bare arm. Her skin felt as silky as her dress. When it reached her wrist he pulled her closer.

Is this a good idea? But the cautious voice came and went away.

Her lips were so near now. Her body was pressed against his. He could feel how her breaths had shortened. The way her pulse fluttered. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. And why shouldn't they have each other? Should he just be alone forever because he and Allie couldn't make it work? Because she wanted someone else?

Because she wanted Sylvain?

No.

'Carter ...' Jules whispered.

'What?' His throat had tightened; he breathed the word.

People were pushing past them on their way to and from the dance floor but they barely noticed.

'Are you ever going to kiss me?' she asked.

He smiled. And lowered his lips to hers.

At first all he noticed was how different it was with her than Allie. Jules smelled differently – of cool roses rather than honeysuckle and spice. Her body felt different. But it was more than that. Her kisses were more assured. Allie was always hesitant, curious, as if she was still learning how to do it. Jules, on the other hand, was confident. Her lips parted instantly, explored him. Her tongue brushed against his. Her hands slipped under his jacket and ran up his back, pulling him tighter.

Things went faster with Jules. Got out of hand faster. And, after a moment he pulled back, half-laughing.

'Hey, we better chill out a little. Parents.'

Her lips curved up. 'I know a place we can go where there aren't any parents.'

He held her gaze. 'Where?'

'My room.'

The noise of the crowd seemed to recede. Carter's heartbeat sped up. He wanted nothing more right now than to continue that kiss. But he knew if that happened – if he went to her room and they continued what they'd started at the edge of the dance floor – their friendship would change forever.

He hesitated. 'I don't know ...'

Her face fell.

With a gentle touch, he smoothed a strand of blonde hair back from her eyes. 'Are you sure about this, Jules? We've always been friends ...'

She took a quick breath. When she spoke, her words came out in a rush. 'I am sure, Carter. I've been sure for a long time. I just didn't know how to tell you. Then you were with Allie and I thought ...'

His face darkened. *You thought it was forever. Well, so did I. And look how wrong we both were.*

That made up his mind. He pressed a soft kiss against the side of her face.

'Let's go.'

Jules smiled and took charge. 'I'll go up now. You wait five minutes then follow me. It wouldn't be good for people to see us going up the stairs together. They won't notice us apart.'

Boys weren't allowed in the girls' dorm but Jules was perfect. She knew how to get around The Rules better than anyone.

After she'd disappeared into the crowd, Carter grabbed another glass of champagne and strolled around the room. Five minutes seemed to take forever to pass.

Now that he'd made up his mind he wanted to be there. With her.

Nearby, Sylvain had joined his parents – Carter's gaze flitted past them to the dance floor. As he watched, Jo swirled by in a sexy velvet mini-dress only she could carry off. She'd dyed her hair bright pink.

Just looking at her made Carter smile. Jo was like human sunshine. He'd have to remember to tell her later how cool she looked.

Allie was nowhere to be seen, and he was glad.

Maybe she hadn't come. He knew she'd tried to get Isabelle to cancel the whole event.

Turning, he weaved a little, stumbling against a chair before he caught himself. He was starting to feel lightheaded – he hadn't eaten anything since lunch and had just had ... how many glasses of champagne?

He needed food.

With effort, he made his way through the throngs to the space where tables were piled high with food. Without really looking at what he chose, he filled a plate with hors d'oeuvres.

Leaning against a wall he ate quickly, watching the dance from a safe distance.

He'd been part of Cimmeria all his life – had hidden at the top of the stairs as a small boy to watch the glamorous set below – but never felt a true part of events like these. With no parents to accompany him, no connection to these people at all aside from Cimmeria itself, he was at once one of them and nothing like them at all.

When he finished, he set the empty plate down on a passing waiter's tray and glanced at his watch. Time to go.

A lock of dark hair fell forward and he pushed it back as he lifted himself from the wall.

That was when he saw her.

In a dark blue dress that perfectly suited her figure, Allie moved slowly through the crowd like a disconsolate starlet. Her hair poured in vivid red waves down her back.

She stood out like a warning light.

Carter's heart seemed to stop. He stared at her, captivated.

She and Jo must have coloured their hair together, he realised, as a thing.

But, while Jo had seemed giddy, beneath the colourful waves of hair Allie's face looked pale, unhappy.

He fought an instinctive urge to go to her, to find out what was wrong. To fix it.

She wasn't his to fix anymore. And besides, Jules was waiting ...

As Allie neared him though, he didn't move. He could have slipped away without her ever seeing him. But he stood there.

Despite everything he still felt drawn to her. Something connected them. She was the only person he knew here who was like him – an outsider. The only one who really got him. Even though he was still angry and hurt ... He also missed having her in his life.

She was so close now he could almost touch her but she hadn't noticed him yet. Like a ghost, he watched unseen as she picked up a crab cake, studied it then put it in her mouth cautiously.

Something about the way she did that, the innocence of it, made up his mind.

He moved towards her. He'd almost reached her side when she turned suddenly, running directly into him.

'I'm sorr ...' they both started to say, then she realised who she'd run into. The words died on his lips as he met her stormy gaze.

'Allie ...' was all his lips would say then.

He couldn't seem to talk. To think.

Their eyes locked. Colour flooded her pale cheeks. She looked horrified. For a moment that stretched too long neither of them said anything. Finally, Carter opened his mouth to tell her how lovely she looked. Just as he did she turned away with a jerk, as if she wanted to escape. As if she couldn't bear even to *look* at him.

Despair ran like ice water through his veins. How had they managed to ruin everything so completely?

Without another word, he fled, letting the crowd close behind him.

He had to stop fooling himself that anything could be resurrected between them. That they could ever be together again.

He had to let her go.

Weaving through the crowd he ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

But when he knocked on Jules' door seconds later, his hand quivered. He tightened it into a fist.

Jules opened the door immediately. 'Bad news,' she said. 'We can't stay long. Isabelle wants me downstairs for speeches. We have ten minutes.'

With that, she grabbed his lapel and pulled him into the room.

Carter almost smiled. Jules was so uninhibited. So sure of what she wanted. Maybe this was what he needed now in his life. Something uncomplicated.

Someone uncomplicated.

He closed the door, leaning his back against it as he looked around.

Her room smelled faintly of her perfume. One wall held a framed poster of an old man with a guitar all painted in dark blue hues. A soft, white rug covered the floor. The bookshelves were stacked with photos, books and knick-knacks. It felt comfortable.

She'd draped a scarf over the bedside lamp, giving it all an ethereal glow. The scarf fluttered in the breeze coming through the open window. The icy air felt good – cooling the perspiration on his skin.

It occurred to him it was cold enough to snow.

She took a step towards him. Her skin glowed in the light.

'Listen, Jules ...' He faltered and she looked at him with concern.

'What's the matter? Did something happen?'

'I just think ...' He reached for her hand, threading his fingers through hers. 'We need to be careful. You matter to me. And I couldn't bear to lose you. After Allie, I'm afraid that ...' He shook his head then and just said it simply. 'I'm afraid.'

'Shhh.' Reaching up, she rested her palm gently against his face. His eyes drifted shut as he leaned in to her touch.

He'd been so lonely for so long it hurt not to be alone.

'Listen to me, Carter West,' she said with soft determination. 'You will *never* lose me. Whatever happens tonight or tomorrow night or all the tomorrows after, I will always be there for you. Do you understand me? Always.'

As she said the words he'd always wanted Allie to say his eyes flew open. He saw nothing in her dark blue gaze but love and honesty.

He so wanted to believe she was right. Maybe, all this time, he'd been looking in the wrong place. Trying to make something happen with Allie when Jules was right here. Waiting for him.

'Jules ...' With a sigh of surrender he lowered his lips to hers.

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Twenty minutes later Carter and Jules walked down a side staircase to the ground floor, hand-in-hand. He could still feel the touch of her lips against his. Smell her scent on his clothes. They moved with easy synchronisation.

He felt happy for the first time in weeks. His thoughts were clear of the haze that had hung over them since he and Allie broke up. He felt focussed. Alive.

As they neared the great hall, Carter noticed the crowds seemed to have thinned. Jules looked around with a puzzled frown.

'I hope we haven't missed the speeches.' Dropping his hand, she hurried her pace. 'Isabelle will kill me.'

Before he could reply they both heard the pounding of footsteps. A Night School student shot by them, loosening his tie as he ran. He was heading for the basement staircase.

Someone called their names.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion as they turned in unison to see Zelazny sprinting down the wide hallway towards them.

'Training Room,' the instructor said without breaking stride. 'Now.'

Carter and Jules exchanged a tense look.

'I guess the party's over,' she said.