

Crouched low amid the bracken, Sylvain stared out through a thick curtain of trees. In the distance, Cimmeria Academy was dark and still. Its tall brick walls and jagged roof looked imposing and silent against the night sky. Nothing stirred.

He glanced down at his watch again. Allie was late. He was starting to get nervous.

They'd planned this night down to the tiniest detail but it was always a risky operation. The guards could have made their rounds at just the wrong moment and spotted her on the stairs. Or another student could have got up for a glass of water and seen Allie slipping down the hallway.

That was all it would take.

He wouldn't let himself think about any of the much worse possibilities. About Gabe or Nathaniel.

His jaw tightened and he squinted into the darkness. If anything happens to her...

His feelings towards Allie were intense – dangerously so. He'd never felt so strongly about anyone in his life. And no one knew better than him that this didn't make sense. Being in love with someone else's girlfriend was stupid. And he didn't do stupid things.

But this time – this one time – he couldn't seem to stop himself. There was something about her that drew him to her. He'd never met anyone so fragile and so strong at the same time. He hadn't known it was possible for those two attributes to exist in one person.

She fascinated him. And she could have been his...

...if I hadn't been such a bastard.

At his sides, Sylvain's hands clenched into fists. Every muscle in his body tightened with self-loathing.

Merde. Why am I thinking about this now?

Closing his eyes tight, he tried to shove the memories away.

Through sheer strength of will he made himself unclench his fists. He shook himself hard, loosening his muscles.

He would do anything to make it up to her. To win her trust again. To prove he'd changed. And that was why he was here now. Breaking all the Rules he'd sworn to uphold for a girl he could never have. Because she'd asked him to do it.

Leaning forward, he looked up at the school again.

His breath caught. In the blue wash of moonlight, something moved.

He pulled a small set of binoculars out of his pocket and held them up to his eyes.

There.

Bent low and moving fast, Allie was running across the lawn, her footsteps so swift and smooth, from a distance she appeared to fly.

Under his breath, Sylvain cursed. He'd been so lost in his own thoughts he hadn't seen her leave the building.

Quickly, he scanned the grounds around her for any sign of pursuit but found nothing. She was safe for now. He turned the binoculars back towards her and watched as she swooped into the woods like a night bird.

The second she reached the secure cover of the tree line, he pocketed the binoculars and headed after her.

His eyes were fully adjusted to the dark by now and his steps were silent and sure. With the ease of practice, he avoided twigs and loose stones, anything that would make noise. He moved through the woods without a sound.

All his senses were alert. He was conscious of every rustle and creak in the forest as he searched for any sign that Allie was being followed by anyone except him.

He was good at tracking; very good at self-defence. But Gabe was out there somewhere tonight. And he was better.

Allie was quiet and careful but he still found her easily, even in the dark. She didn't have as much training as he did. He heard a faint splash as she stepped into water. The snap of a twig breaking into under her foot.

Ducking low behind a wild holly bush he watched her make her way down the footpath towards the stream. Again he scanned the area around her.

Nothing. Despite the ruckus she was making, no one was following her.

In the distance, Allie clambered over a fallen tree, crashing noisily through the branches. Sylvain winced.

Well, if Gabe didn't know she was here before he knows it now.

After that Sylvain didn't try to hide from anyone who might be watching. If Gabe and Nathaniel were tracking Allie, they needed to know she wasn't alone.

The sound of roaring water let him know they were near the stream where the meeting would take place and he hurried ahead of her to the hiding spot he'd chosen earlier that day.

From there he watched Allie make her way tentatively down to the waterside. The recent rains had swollen the stream until its waters roiled. The moon turned the froth to sparkling silver.

She looked so alone standing there in the dark, hands flicking anxiously at her sides, Sylvain's heart went out to her. He knew how much this meant to her.

A sudden movement disturbed the trees across the stream. Allie had noticed it too, she looked up sharply.

Sylvain ducked lower as a young man stepped out onto the muddy stream bed. It was hard to see his face from this angle but he could hear his voice.

'Allie.' The way he said her name was both familiar and tentative.

Even from a distance Sylvain could see her body tense.

'Christopher,' she said, sounding as if she couldn't believe it was true.

So this was the brother who'd ruined her life.

Tilting his head to one side, Sylvain studied him with open suspicion. He'd been curious about him ever since Jo had told him the story of how Allie ended up at Cimmeria. How her brother had run away, leaving a vicious note behind. The way the family had imploded. How Allie had struggled to bring her parents back to her by getting into trouble over and over again.

How instead that had just pushed everyone away.

And now, here she was, again. Putting her life in danger. Still trying to get her family back.

All because of her brother.

In the distance, Christopher took another step forward and the moonlight caught his face. He had her grey eyes – otherwise there was little similarity in their appearance. He was tall and slim, with a tight, nervous stance. He kept glancing over his shoulder as if someone might creep up behind him.

At first they talked about family things and how they'd missed each other. Christopher called her 'Allie-cat' and Sylvain could see how that touched her.

It must be his pet name for her.

Then their conversation moved on to Lucinda and Christopher's expression changed. He looked angry now. Threatening.

Sylvain watched him closely for any sign that he might hurt her. But his anger seemed directed elsewhere.

'So you know she lied to us our whole lives,' Christopher was saying. 'And that she and Isabelle conspired to keep us in the dark about our own family.

And now our grandmother . . .' he spat the word out with contempt ' . . . is denying us our family heritage. You do know that. Right?'

Allie held up her hands in a placating gesture. 'Wait, wait, wait...' Her tone was soothing but steady. She didn't look frightened anymore. Now, she looked watchful. She was talking to him like an equal now, rather than a little sister. 'How is Lucinda denying us anything?'

Good girl, Sylvain thought. Don't let him confuse your emotions.

'She refuses to acknowledge us as her family, Allie,' Christopher said. He looked exasperated. 'How can you not know this? It's all because of Isabelle. She's wheedled herself into Lucinda's good graces, replacing our mother. The last thing Isabelle wants now is for two kids to come along – real blood relatives – and take their rightful place as Lucinda's heirs. So she's keeping you at Cimmeria where she can control you completely.'

Sylvain's eyes narrowed. What he was saying was ridiculous. But the more Christopher talked, the more passionate he became. Now Allie was just trying to calm him down and to get him to say something more useful. Her goal was to find out what Nathaniel's plans were.

'You don't know her, Chris,' Allie said. 'She's not like that. She really cares about me . . . about our family.'

'Oh she does, does she?' The heat that had fired his previous words was gone, replaced by ice. 'Then ask yourself this: Why did she lie about Ruth's death? And if you died, what would she say about you?'

What? Sylvain stared at Christopher in disbelief. *Is he trying to convince Allie that Isabelle is as bad as Nathaniel because of what happened with Ruth?*

It was ridiculous. Gabe killed Ruth. After that, Isabelle had no choice. The incident had to be hidden. With Nathaniel manipulating the police, any scandal could bring Isabelle down, and perhaps ruin the entire school.

Surely Allie understood this?

But in the moonlight he saw Allie's shoulders slump. Christopher's words had done their job. He'd made her doubt the only adult she still trusted.

It was a cruel and heartless thing to do to her. And Sylvain could have happily punched her brother in the face for it, but this scene had to play out. So he stayed still and let them talk. Christopher was raving about Nathaniel now.

'He's going to change everything. Fix all the things that have gone wrong in the world because the wrong people are in charge. Put the right people in charge. You know what Cimmeria is, right? I mean, what it's part of? If he ran the organisation, he could really do it, Allie. He could change everything. Fix everything.'

Putain. Sylvain thought, disgusted. *He's an idiot. He sided with a dictator and now he needs her to join him so he doesn't have to realise he's made a horrible mistake.*

Allie asked all the right questions, trying to draw out more information. Christopher became charming again, talking about games they'd played as children, the trouble they'd got into.

At last, though, someone came for him. Sylvain could just see the figure of a man through the trees but couldn't make out his features. He said something quietly to Christopher, who turned back to Allie and said an abrupt goodbye.

Then, as quickly as they'd arrived, the two men slipped away into the night.

When they'd gone, Allie stood very still.

Her hands twisted together in front of her as she stared down into the rushing water of the stream.

Sylvain had to restrain himself from rushing down to her. She had to do this on her own. He knew that's what she wanted. Silently he willed her to get it together – to follow the plan.

As if she'd heard his thoughts, she straightened and struck the tears from her cheeks with a quick swipe of her hand. Then with slow, determined steps she turned away from the water and followed the rocky path up to the chapel, as they'd agreed.

Shadowing her from some distance away, Sylvain allowed himself to feel relieved. They'd done it. The plan had gone off without a hitch. All they had to do now was get back to the school building. Then they could discuss everything they'd learned. And decide what to do next.

He was thinking about what he'd say, and how best to handle it, when Allie disappeared.

One minute she was there on the path, and the next second she was gone.

A frown creasing his brow, Sylvain stared at the spot where she should be. Did she fall?

He stood still, holding his breath, waiting for her to reappear.

Then he heard a muffled grunt, as if someone were lifting something heavy.

His heart stuttered and he grasped the branch of the tree next to him.

Gabe stepped into the moonlight. In his arms, he held Allie in a vice-like grip.

She wasn't moving.

* * *

Everything switched to slow motion.

Sylvain had no chance to do anything but react. Gabe was moving fast and he wasn't trying to be quiet. Sylvain rushed through the woods, shadowing him as he'd earlier shadowed Allie.

Only now his heart was filled with hate.

Hate filled him with cold clarity. Hate enhanced his senses and helped him move with stealth and speed. Hate gave him purpose.

Gabe had killed Ruth and betrayed them all. He was vicious. Sylvain had to get Allie away from him.

He kept his eyes on her body as he ran, willing her to move. She was so still, limp as toy in Gabe's grasp.

After a long, painful minute, she finally stirred. The rush of relief made Sylvain's knees weak.

She was Ok.

At first she moved slowly, then she began struggling in Gabe's arms, frantic to get away. But her movements were inefficient. Sylvain could see she was panicking.

Come on, Allie, he urged her silently. Remember your training.

Sylvain was close to them now. If Gabe had looked to his left he'd have seen him, matching him step for step. But Gabe's eyes remained straight ahead, as he walked with relentless purpose.

There must be a car waiting just off the grounds, Sylvain realised. They were taking Allie away – to Nathaniel.

She'd quit fighting now. Sylvain hoped that meant she'd come up with a plan.

And so she had. Without warning, she swung her legs out and back, bending her knees so her feet kicked Gabe hard in the groin.

Even Gabe – with all his training and power – couldn't stand up to that kind of blow.

Crying out in pain, he doubled over, losing his grip on Allie, who tumbled hard to the ground.

She recovered from the fall quickly and scabbled away, crawling on the ground but Gabe, still gasping for air, wasn't done yet. Quick as a snake, his hand shot out, grabbing her ankle and pulling her back.

Screaming in frustration and pain, Allie kicked hard at his hand but Gabe's grip was strong.

Sylvain was running at full speed now. Spotting a heavy, club-like branch on the side of the path, he grabbed it without breaking stride and hurtled towards them. Using all of his speed and power into it, he hit Gabe hard on the back of his head.

The cracking sound the wood made against Gabe's skull echoed in the quiet like a gunshot. The larger boy groaned and reached for the back of his head, releasing Allie.

But he didn't, as Sylvain had hoped, fall down.

Instead, he jumped to his feet and swung around to face him. His eyes were predatory, assessing and utterly without empathy.

'Sylvain, you dick,' he said. 'That hurt.'

Still holding the club, Sylvain kept his face fearless.

'Good,' he said. 'That was my intention.'

Blood poured down one side of Gabe's face. His dark blonde hair was sticky with it. In the moonlight it looked black as tar.

Sylvain knew he needed to distract Gabe's attention away from Allie – give her a chance to get away. He circled the taller boy like a panther, bouncing lightly on his heels as if he wanted nothing more right now than a fight with a psychopath.

'Well.' Gabe gave a lazy grin, 'let's do this.'

In a movement Sylvain would spend months trying to figure out, Gabe duck and spun so quickly his body was a blur. Caught off guard, Sylvain swung at him but Gabe had angled himself perfectly. Grabbing the club with ruthless strength, he twisted it in under-and-over manoeuvre. If Sylvain hadn't let go it would have broken his wrist.

Now it was Gabe's club.

Looking up, Sylvain saw Allie standing at the edge of the path, eyes wide.

'Run, Allie.' He kept his voice steady and calm, hoping this would convince her that he was in control.

He should have known better.

She shook her head stubbornly. 'I'm not leaving you.'

Some part of him was touched by this – given hope. But if she stayed this was all for nothing.

Her misguided sense of loyalty would get them both killed.

‘Run,’ he said again, raising his voice. ‘Now.’

Gabe, who had his back to her so he could keep his eyes on Sylvain, spoke up then. ‘Yes. Run, Allie. You don’t want to see this. I’ll come get you in a minute. And I will pay you back for kicking me in the balls.’

His words sent a chill down Sylvain’s spine but he kept his gaze on Allie, begging her with his eyes to heed his request. Because of that, he almost missed it when Gabe swung the makeshift club at his head.

The only warning Sylvain had was the look of horror on Allie’s face. Moving on instinct, he ducked to the right but the club struck him a glancing blow that forced a cry of pain from him.

He couldn’t argue with Allie any more. He had to be in this thing completely.

No one had ever beat Gabe in training. He was the best fighter Night School had ever produced. And this fight was real.

Recovering, Sylvain whirled and lowered his centre of gravity to hit Gabe hard with an elbow in the torso. It was like punching a rock. Pain shot down his arm.

He heard the air leave Gabe’s lungs, but the other boy didn’t look like it hurt him as much as it had hurt Sylvain.

He glanced back to where Allie had stood but she was gone.

He hoped she was running fast. If she could bring back help they might stand a chance.

But even as he thought it he knew it was hopeless. There wasn’t time. They were nearly a mile from the school building. By the time help arrived he’d be dead.

Still, at least Allie would be safe.

And that was what mattered.

He'd taken things from her when they first met – her faith in people. Her trust.

At least he could give her the chance to live.

Watching his expression, Gabe's lips turned up in a sardonic grin. 'She's gone now. You can relax. Bloody hell, Sylvain, I can't believe you're messing with Carter's girl. That's not like you. Usually you like them all fresh and unsullied.'

Sylvain spun a whirling kick at his face, but Gabe ducked the blow, swiping his foot away like a cat toying with a mouse, and punched Sylvain hard in the temple. The blow sent him reeling.

His head rang. Warm blood gushed down the side of his face making it hard to see.

I must have a cut above my eye, he thought, trying to stay rational. *It's nothing.*

'You'll have to try harder than that, Sylvain,' Gabe taunted him. 'Have you been too busy messing with Carter's sloppy seconds to practice? Looks like she's got you whipped.'

Sylvain's fist caught him on the jaw this time, a square blow that made Gabe's neck twist.

'You'll pay for that.' Gabe whirled on him with a roar.

Moving fast, Sylvain dodged him, aiming a kick at his knee as he passed. But Gabe was faster. Catching Sylvain's foot he flipped him high into the air.

For a second, the world spun. Then Sylvain landed with such force all the air left his lungs. Some part of him wanted nothing so much as to lie there. But he couldn't. Allie needed time to get back to the school building. He had to keep Gabe here longer.

With a groan, he staggered to his feet. But as he weaved his way back to the path it occurred to him that he would lose this fight. And that Gabe wouldn't stop until he killed him.

'Come on, Sylvain.' Gabe said, cracking his knuckles. 'Don't give up now. I'm just starting to have fun.'

Sylvain spit blood on the ground. Then he turned to face his enemy again, hands clenched in front of him.

'Why are you here?' he heard himself ask.

'What is that? A philosophical question?' Gabe's expression turned icy. 'I'm here because my boss sent me. I'm here to collect a package and go home. That's all I wanted to do but you got in the way.'

The punches seemed to come faster this time. Sylvain's reactions were getting slower. But he held his own until Gabe's fist struck him square in the jaw. For a split second, everything went dark, then it zoomed horribly back into focus again.

Shaking his head to clear it, he again pried himself up off the cold earth.

It was hard to see through the blood and sweat. Gabe looked blurry and indistinct. The night took on a kind of hazy unreality. Like he was watching himself fight and fall from far away.

Every part of his body hurt but he thought he could still kick. He struggled forward for one last try. Gabe smiled.

Grabbing Sylvain's left arm, Gabe twisted it behind him sending a sharp pain through his shoulder. Sylvain struggled to free himself but each movement made the pain worse. He heard himself cry out.

Then Gabe wrapped his other arm tightly across his neck.

Sylvain was trapped.

'That was an amateur's mistake, Sylvain,' Gabe tutted. 'I'm disappointed. You used to be so good. What would Raj Patel say?'

He tightened his arm across Sylvain's throat, cutting off his air.

Tendrils of panic wrapped around Sylvain's chest. He knew self-defence; he understood the concepts of hand-to-hand combat. So he knew this game was over. There was no way to free himself from this.

His hands gripped Gabe's arm, but he had no strength. Without oxygen he'd be unconscious in seconds. He could hear himself wheezing.

'Oh, Sylvain,' Gabe said pityingly. 'What a way to go. All alone in the woods, Beaten by the traitor. All because of Carter's girl. Who would have believed it?'

Sylvain wanted to fight but he couldn't seem to move. His hands dropped to his sides. His eyes fluttered shut.

Gabe was wrong. It wasn't a bad way to go, really.

Suddenly, as if from far away, he heard a shriek. Gabe's entire body shuddered. His arms loosened and Sylvain fell free.

He couldn't remember hitting the ground. The next thing he knew, Allie was there, fear in her eyes, pulling him to his feet with all her strength.

I must be dreaming.

'Allie?' He tried to say the word, but his mouth wouldn't seem to work. His whole face felt broken.

Her arm was tight around his waist and he wanted to tell her it was hurting his ribs but he couldn't say that either.

He looked around for Gabe and saw him lying on the path, a broken stake sticking out of his shoulder.

'You little bitch,' Gabe gasped, glaring at Allie. 'You stabbed me.' Grasping the stake, he tried to pull it out then screamed again, letting go.

The fear disappeared from Allie's eyes. Replaced by rage.

'You little . . .'

'Yeah I know, "bitch",' she snapped, cutting him off. 'You said that already.'

Adrenaline was making her brave and she leaned towards Gabe to say something else but Sylvain found the strength to hold onto her and pull her back to him.

Surprised, she turned to look at him.

'We have to run,' Sylvain explained reasonably, but the words came out as garbled mush.

He frowned, puzzled by his own inability to speak intelligibly.

'What?' she asked. 'I don't understand.'

She looked so brave.

He took a deep breath. He ordered himself not to feel the pain.

'We have to run,' he said again, more clearly this time.

This time he knew she understood, because she turned with him, and they ran together into the darkness.