

Rival  
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**Her destiny. His determination.**

Born a fifth generation vampire Chaser, seventeen-year-old Emily Santos wants nothing more than to join the family business. But Emily's mother refuses, so Emily must channel her aggression into her martial arts training.

Black belt senior Brett Carson has decided it's time to rid himself of his unrequited feelings for Emily. But when he finds himself in the middle of an altercation with Emily and a gang of vampires, he is drawn into a world he never expected. And Brett is hiding a secret of his own...

## 1 - Emily

My sneakers hit the pavement and my heart slams like the truck door behind me.

"Watch it!" My cousin and best friend Erick hops out of the drivers' side, reprimanding me at the same time. Sensitive about his truck.

"Sorry," I mutter.

The dim, enclosed parking garage puts me on edge. It's a perfect place for vampires. But it's early afternoon, not their prime hunting time.

The upscale Austin, Texas, mall parking lot is packed with sedans and trucks.

I sling a motorcycle helmet into the bed of the truck, where it joins the massive four-wheeler we just spent an exhilarating morning breaking in. A gift for his eighteenth birthday a couple of months ago.

For my eighteenth, I'm getting a night of torture. Mom-style.

"I can't believe you're making me do this." Erick stuffs his hands in his pockets as we walk toward the mall entrance.

His jeans and t-shirt are mud-splattered, and when I look down, mine haven't fared any better. I run a hand over my hair and discover most of it has come loose from the long braid down my back.

Thank goodness *she* isn't here to see. And Sunday afternoon traffic at the mall is light.

"I can't believe *my mom* is making me do this," I grumble.

He's heard it all before, how I can't stand the thought of going through a cotillion, a big debutante ball to-do for my birthday party. I'd rather be focusing on my martial arts, but my mom insists. Until I turn eighteen, I have to bow to her wishes, including not fighting.

But on Sunday, the day after my birthday, I'll be hunting. Seven more days until freedom.

For today, Erick and I have to pick out my dress. I think mom knew better than to join me. Ending up in a blowout fight in such a public place would probably ruin her rep with her ritzy friends.

"Let's get this over with." Surely it won't take long to find something gaudy enough for my mother.

Twenty minutes later, I'm staring at myself in the mirrors surrounding me, the horror I feel reflected on my face. In triplicate.

"It doesn't fit right. Just like all the rest." This is the fifth one.

I know why, even if Erick and the sales lady helping us are too polite to say anything. I'm too flat up top, too tall, and too skinny to pull off any of these formal gowns.

On the other hand, the gowns with strapless or spaghetti straps show off my biceps nicely. Too bad I can't have a *kama*—a traditional

Filipino weapon, looks like a scythe—as an accessory. But my mom seems to want to forget the weapons part of our family tradition and focus only on this big party.

"Maybe something knee-length..." the sales lady murmurs, hurrying away from the dressing room.

*Take me with you!* I shout silently.

Behind me in the mirror, Erick plays on his smartphone.

I snap my fingers and he looks up; our eyes meet in the mirror. "Is it too much to ask for you to actually look at the dresses?"

He shrugs. "I'm not a chick. You should've asked a girl along if you wanted a commentary on color and frills."

But he knows I don't have any real girlfriends, so I'm not surprised when he puts the phone down next to his thigh and leans forward on his elbows. "It's not *that* bad."

I snort at his blatant lie.

He crosses his eyes in the mirror at me.

I stick my tongue out, and it's almost like we're in sixth grade again. Back when everything was easy. Back when my dad was alive.

"I wish I were your sister."

He rolls his eyes. "If you think my dad would let you out of having a debutante, you're crazy."

"At least he'd let me *Chase*."

Our eyes meet again in the mirror, serious this time. It's something that's always there in the back of our minds... the vampires we were born to destroy.

My mom married into a Chaser family, but I don't think she really understood what it meant until after my dad died. In our branch of the family tree, I'm the only one who can carry on the legacy. I can't just let it die, not when it's something I've been born to do. Someone has to step up and protect the humans.

Even if it means she and I part ways after this shindig. I haven't exactly told her my plan, though.

"Try this one." The sales lady bustles back into the dressing area and shoves a pile of magenta fabric into my arms. She pushes me off the carpeted block in front of the mirrors toward the changing rooms.

I'm pulling the dress over my head, wobbling in the unfamiliar high heels the saleslady forced on me earlier, when I hear another male voice join Erick's outside the curtain. I don't pay much attention to it. It's probably another guy here to help his girlfriend find a prom dress. Acting the contortionist to zip the side zipper takes enough concentration. This dress feels like it hugs in all the right places, but there isn't a mirror in this closet-like space, so I push aside the curtain...

And freeze on the threshold.

Erick isn't alone, and the guy with him is possibly the last person on earth I want to see.

Brett Carson.

An irrational burst of heat fills my neck and cheeks as Brett's bright blue eyes lock on mine. His shock of short brown hair is as unwelcome as the rest of him. His usual cowboy hat is missing, though the boots are there beneath his jeans.

He wolf whistles and curses softly as his gaze travels the length of my body.

"What are you doing here?" I bark, because I'm pretty sure he's mocking me. I don't trust anything about Brett, not since his betrayal two years ago.

Trying to ignore the hot feeling of his gaze, I march to the block and hop up, examining every minute detail of the dress.

"I was in the neighborhood," he says.

Over my shoulder in the mirror, I see a flash of white teeth against his tanned skin, but I don't respond to his remark.

Erick is suspiciously silent. If my cousin had anything to do with Brett showing up, I'll beat it out of him later.

The sales clerk moves close and tugs at my bodice. "This one fits much better, dear. Makes it look like you've got something up here after all."

The heat in my face intensifies. I don't have any illusions about my attractiveness to the opposite sex, not with my build, but she didn't have to point that out in front of Brett, did she?

"And it makes your legs look great."

My eyes dart to Brett's in the mirror and our gazes collide. Did he really just say that?

Erick clears his throat and I blink, breaking the connection, but the sudden roiling in my stomach remains.

"Can we get it and go?" my cousin mutters, shifting his feet.

"Fine," I agree.

The sales clerk motions me to turn around. "Lift your arms, dear. There's a bit of extra fabric here..." She pinches a fingerful of purple beneath my armpits. "We've got a seamstress on staff who can fix this for you in a couple of days. It'll be a perfect fit."

"That's fine. Thanks," I grudgingly say, because it isn't her fault I've got to have the dress.

There's a chance my mother will hate it. I know she wanted me to wear something floor-length, but like Erick said, this *is* the dress. If mother doesn't like it, she can come shopping herself.

"So what's the occasion? Planning a party to celebrate your win this weekend?"

We both know he's talking about the freestyle martial arts tournament that is sponsored by our dojo. Three days of fighting. It's the biggest event of its kind in this part of Texas. I've been waiting all year to compete. Besides being able to Chase, this is the next most important thing to me, a chance to showcase my talents and prove to my uncle I should be allowed to join the family business.

Brett has wandered closer and continues examining me from head to toe. What is he looking for, the keys to the universe?

What the *heck* is he doing here? We used to be friends, before the fight he threw two years ago, but we haven't spoken in probably six months, and that was a "can I borrow a pencil" conversation during a Chem II test.

We aren't friends now and never will be, if I have anything to say about it. I don't hang with quitters.

The sales lady finishes pinning me up and advises me to be careful getting out of the dress, so I don't stick myself. Like I'm five years old or something.

I turn to step off the block and teeter in the heels. I reach out for something to steady myself with, and my hand is surrounded by a dry, warm grip.

Not Erick.

Brett.

I lurch on the edge of the viewing block, about to rip my hand away from his, but he gives a gentle tug, and I have to step off or fall down.

He uses my momentum to swing me in an almost-unawkward dance turn beneath his arm.

We move together naturally in the motion. With the extra height the heels give me, my temple brushes his jaw. My stomach swoops like I'm on the first giant hill of a roller coaster.

My ankle turns in the uncomfortable shoes. It's the only excuse I have for staying in his arms. He dips me, one hot palm searing my bare upper back. He leans over me, supporting most of my weight, those blue eyes startling, so close I can see light brown flecks surrounding his irises.

Close enough to kiss.

I don't like the vulnerable position.

"Get your hands off of me." I jerk away and stumble, but I catch myself on the dressing room wall.

I slip inside the curtains before he can see how I'm shaking. Trembling all over.

Why does he affect me this way? Even after *knowing* he is a liar. He claims not to have thrown the last fight of the competition two years ago, but I know he did.

Quitter.

"You never did say what the dress is for," he calls out.

## 2 - Brett

Most of my friends think I'm an open book, but I have two secrets.

One, I'm in love with Emily Santos and have been since we were fourteen. I'll never forget how she took me down to the mats while sparring at our martial arts practice. It was love at first fight.

Emily has made it clear—over and over—that she's not interested. Doesn't even want to be my friend.

So it's time for the infatuation to end. Today.

I've given myself twenty-four hours to purge her from my system. I'm tired of these unrequited feelings, and I'm ready to move on to greener pastures.

I've seen the way other girls look at me. I know I'm hot. Toned from working out and the martial arts Emily and I have in common. I'm ready to get some action elsewhere.

I just have to kick this sick fascination with Emily first.

"It's for my cotillion," she mutters from inside the dressing room.

I lean on the wall outside, cross my arms over my chest. Surely a few more of her insults, and I'll develop an immunity to her.

Except I saw the way her eyes darkened when I dipped her, a cheesy move, like we were in some kind of teen dance movie. She's not immune to me.

My heart still pounds, but I fake casual.

"What's a cotillion?" I ask.

"Big fancy dance," Erick chimes in, though he doesn't look up from some game on his phone. "Girl's eighteenth birthday thing."

"Stupid party." Emily bursts out of the dressing room, curtains flying behind her. She's dressed in a pair of mud-spattered skinny jeans and a fitted t-shirt.

She's just as hot in her street clothes as she was in that fancy, frilly purple dress.

She doesn't even glance at me.

"So I'm invited, right?" I trail her as she goes to the counter to pay the sales lady. Erick slowly follows us.

"It's family-only," she snaps.

"Well..." Erick stuffs his phone in his back pocket, eyes scanning the store around us. Chick-scoping? "There's always the last dance, reserved for someone special. Like a boyfriend."

"Which I don't have," she mutters.

"You could," I offer. I turn on a winning smile. Usually, it makes girls sigh, but apparently it doesn't affect Emily. She barely flicks her dark-brown eyes at me, lips pinching as she takes a platinum credit card back from the sales lady and slides it into her pocket. No purse for Emily. Probably too girly.

"I wouldn't date a quitter," she mutters. Her voice is barely

above a whisper, but I still hear it.

I know exactly what she's talking about.

And it's all because of secret number two.

I face a daily battle. I have juvenile arthritis.

I hate it. Saying the word arthritis makes me sound like a sissy, like I'm some kind of farty old man.

Two years ago, I had a flare up right in the middle of the annual tournament, the biggest deal in six counties, and I couldn't finish the fight. I was in such pain that I ended up in the hospital for a day and a half.

But I didn't tell anyone.

And Emily thinks I threw the match on purpose. Like I would really insult her like that!

None of my friends know about my disease. I don't want them to.

I want to stay the hot senior, not become an object of pity.

Emily turns away from the counter. Done with her transaction, apparently.

"We gonna eat?" Erick asks. "I'm starving."

"I'll go with." I include myself, not missing the scathing look she sends her cousin over her shoulder.

Erick shrugs, his ears turning pink, which is a little hard for someone with such a dark complexion. He and I struck up a friendship earlier this semester, in Spanish class, where he's a natural and I struggle.

"Been riding this morning?" I ask. It's pretty obvious by the mud on both their clothes, but I'm making conversation.

"Yep. You should've seen Emily flying over the hills."

I can imagine it. Watching her in action during a sparring match is intense. Not just because she's hot, but because of her fire. It's something inside her, the intensity, passion that she exudes... It's amazing to watch her fight.

I just wish she'd turn some of that passion my direction.

She ignores the both of us. Walking a little behind her near-jog, Erick shrugs back at me. Yes, I've confided in him. We're not best buds, but he noticed me moping over her one too many times and tricked me into spilling. He's on board with my *purge her from system* plan.

They both hit up the food court hamburger joint, but part of my treatment plan is not eating too much junk food, so I grab a smoothie and join them at the mishmash of tables and chairs.

I can't help but notice that Emily sits on the side of the table with no chairs nearby—probably trying to force me to sit opposite her, where Erick is.

I drag over a chair. The action sounds like nails on a chalkboard, only louder. She winces as I plop down next to her.

"So this party, will there be dancing?" I take a slurp from my straw, offer it to her, but she pushes my wrist away with a wrinkle of her nose.



"Yep," Erick affirms. "Ballroom style."

She shakes her head, eyes closing as if in pain.

"All night?" I ask.

She moans, leaning one elbow on the table and pushing her fist into her forehead. Still munching a fry though. My kind of girl.

"No." Erick grins.

"Thank goodness," Emily mutters under her breath.

"Mostly, it's just at the start. There's a traditional dance where the debutante's father—"

"Uncle," Emily corrects, and there's a tightness to her voice.

Erick and I both freeze, but Emily keeps eating, eyes on the table in front of her.

The blunder is a cold reminder that Emily's dad passed away two years ago. Just before the tournament she thinks I threw.

Erick recovers quickly. "Right. My dad will dance with Emily, then all the male cousins—"

"Every stinking one of them," she mutters.

"...then it's tradition that the debutante dances with the 'male her heart treasures most.'"

She stuffs her face with the burger. "That won't be happening," she says with a mouthful.

"If you don't want anything to do with it, why are you bothering to throw the party?" I ask, because it's pretty obvious she's not into it.

There's a long silence between Emily and her cousin.

"It's for my mom," Emily says finally.

But she doesn't seem happy about it.

### 3 - Emily

After the disastrous late lunch with my cousin and our tag-along, Brett, I'm ready to kick it out of the mall. I lead the way out of the main building and into the nearby parking garage, but the boys lag behind, talking about a Spanish class.

Their voices lower, and my nose starts to itch. Are they talking about me?

I try not to care as I clatter down the stairs to the level where Erick parked his truck. It's daylight outside, at least for a little longer, but in this enclosed space, it's dank and shadowed.

It puts me on edge a little, which I why I notice the movement at the far end of the garage. Could be someone going to their car, but after a moment I still don't see any taillights flash or hear an engine crank.

"Erick?" I call out over my shoulder.

There is more muted conversation between the boys, and they edge marginally closer, but I'm still ahead.

A faint shuffling sound turns my head the other direction. What was that movement a couple of rows over?

Again I strain my ears, listening for the sound of a car door closing. Silence.

I'm on the tips of my toes, spine tingling. A warning sign my dad always told me not to ignore.

I wish I had a weapon on me. But since I'm not an official Chaser yet—thanks to my mom's stubborn insistence that I stay out of the family business—I've got nothing.

But Erick probably does. Maybe not a gun, but a knife or *something*.

I whistle a heads-up back to my cousin. At the same moment, a tall, thickly-built guy with unwashed, scraggly blond hair stalks out between two cars, only a few yards ahead. Coming right at me.

The sharp planes of his face tell what he is even before I register the pitch-black eyes and bared fangs.

Vampire.

Before he died, my dad trained me in all kinds of defensive and combat fighting. But that's all it was. Training. I've never gone against a vamp in real life.

Until now.

There's no hesitating as he lunges at me. I duck to one side and hear the hiss of air as his strike misses very close to my head and shoulder.

"Emily!" Erick shouts behind me.

Footsteps pound on the pavement, but I only get a glimpse of the boys approaching. I've got to keep my focus on the monster coming at me again.

I glimpse two more vamps, a girl and a guy with a crew cut, come out from among the multitude of cars, rushing the boys. I don't have time to see what happens to them, because the vamp that attacked me tries a grab this time. I slide past his reaching claws and use a nearby car's bumper to climb and vault into a backflip, arcing over the vamp and landing behind him. I shove between his shoulder blades, and he tumbles between the two cars.

I can't let down my guard. I know he's getting right up.

Vamps heal quickly, so they're hard to kill. With a weapon, you can inflict a death-wound by targeting the heart or head.

Without a weapon...? I'm on defense, and I don't like it.

Heart pounding, half-panicking, I jog backward, scanning the ground for anything I might be able to use. Piece of broken glass from a previous fender bender? Gun someone left behind?

Didn't think so.

Yards away, Erick grapples with the female vamp, silver glinting in the low light. He must have a knife. Closer, Brett kicks the last of the three, the crew cut male, and the move sends it to its hands and knees. But it gets right up.

"You know these guys?" he asks over his shoulder, out of breath.

Probably asking because they attacked me first.

"No!"

With three of them coming after us, they must've targeted Erick or me as Chasers. Probably a case of *wrong place at the wrong time*.

Brett turns a nice roundhouse and clocks the vamp in the head with the heel of his cowboy boot.

Watching him street fight in his cowboy garb is a little unsettling.

A normal human would've blacked out from the hits Brett is getting in. But the vamp just shakes it off and keeps coming, this time baring his fangs at Brett.

"What the—"

I've lost focus, and the blond vamp comes at me from the side. I see him before he gets his hands on me, but can't get completely out of his way. He tackles me, sending me forward.

I cry out and stumble right into Brett, almost taking us both down, but he steadies me with a hand at my waist.

For a moment, everything seems to stop around us. His blue eyes lock on mine, and I see a steady determination in their depths. For a moment, I *feel* it. A connection. We're going to get out of this. Together.

When I turn back to face the vamp, I'm back-to-back with Brett. And much steadier.

I sweep out a low kick, knocking the vamp's feet out from beneath him.

"Don't let them get too close," I warn Brett. I don't want to imagine what their fangs would do to either one of us. Slice right

through an artery, probably.

"Yeah, no kidding." He grunts, maybe getting in a blow of his own.

But the vamps just keep coming at us, and neither of us has a weapon to dispatch them.

Until the blond vamp in front of me reaches into an inside pocket on his bulky jacket and comes out with a wicked-looking blade.

I curse.

"Emily?" Brett asks over his shoulder.

Very faintly, I can hear the sound of sirens. Just what we need for our little party, human cops to mess things up.

"Mine's got a knife," I tell him.

#### 4 - Brett

My stomach drops at Emily's words. That punk pulled a knife on her?

These guys must be on something. It's the only explanation I have, because they've taken hits that would've made a linebacker cry like a baby, but these dudes just keep coming at us.

Emily moves. She's behind me, so I can't see her as I face off with *crew cut* in front of me. Almost like she jumped back.

It revs my anger that someone is trying to gut her.

*Crew cut* growls. Literally growls. He swipes at me, and I'm pretty sure his claws glitter in the dim lighting.

But that's impossible, right? People don't have *claws*.

"Erick?" Emily calls out. She ducks to the side as I throw a punch at my opponent. His cheek crunches in, making him look ghastly. Blood spills from a gash on the side of his face.

And he's still not stopping.

Erick grunts. Obviously, he's having a little trouble getting away from the girl attacking him.

Who are these freaks, and why did they come after us?

Emily snakes her arm through mine and jerks me to one side, taking me to my knees. The jolt of pain is nothing compared to what the bruises are going to feel like tomorrow.

I look up to see the blond-haired punk with the knife is standing where I just was.

She saved me.

I can't help grinning. She's not immune.

I push back to my feet. If we weren't fighting for our lives, this might be fun.

"Wanna try something different?" I ask.

She nods, eyes on the two guys, now converging and coming at us together.

I bend over and lace my fingers together, make myself into a human catapult. Her eyes widen for a moment, then glint with a shimmer of a smile. She tucks one foot into my hands, knee bent for her springboard.

"Don't kick me," I tell her, then launch her airborne.

Our attackers weren't expecting it, and she flies right over their heads. They watch her, necks bending backwards, mouths agape. Couple of brain surgeons, these two.

In their distraction, I rush them, aiming for the shoulder of the one holding the knife.

And, miracle of miracles, it flies out of his hand, clattering on the ground beneath a nearby car.

Emily wastes no time getting back in the fight. She kicks *crew cut* in the back of one knee, and he buckles.

The one I've got ahold of reaches behind and grabs the back of my shirt, going down but taking me with him, slamming my back into the pavement and knocking the air out of me.

His head is close to mine, and all I can think about are those glinting fangs. They can't be real, right? But they sure didn't look like those plastic things you find in stores at Halloween.

"Brett!"

Emily's voice rings in my head at the same time I hear a fainter, "Emily!" from her cousin.

I'm flat on my back, and I don't totally get what happens next because it goes so fast, but I'm pretty sure Erick throws her his knife. She grabs a silver blade out of the air and slams it down, right into the blond guy's face.

His grip on me goes slack.

She doesn't hesitate as she rips the knife free, spurting blood, and stabs it into *crew cut's* heart. His eyes widen, and he collapses in a heap on the concrete floor, face frozen with that shocked expression.

And then it's just the two of us, staring at each other, breathing hard.

I'm numb. All I can feel is the heavy weight pressing me down. Did all that really just happen?

Sirens blare, echoing off the walls, like a police car has turned into the parking garage.

Are our attackers dead? Are we in trouble? It was self-defense, obviously. But are there security cameras to prove that?

My mind spins as I shove the guy off and sit up.

I hear Erick's footsteps as he runs toward us and remember—he was fighting the girl. Where...? And then I see her body, crumpled in a pool of blood, leaning against the concrete wall.

Erick's words are distant, even though he's right in front of me. "We've got to get out of here," he pants. He's roughed up, bloody and bruised on one side of his face, and his shirt is torn.

"There's no time." Emily rises from her crouch, glancing around like she's looking for a place to hide.

I push to my feet. "Shouldn't we talk to the cops—?"

"No!" they both cry, silencing my question before I can finish.

Three people are dead. I think so, anyway. We can't just walk away from this.

But Emily and Erick only seem to want to escape. The sirens are getting even louder, making my already-aching head throb even worse.

"Where's your car?" Erick demands.

I point to my ride. "This is me."

My cycle is tucked between two cars, and I wheel it out quickly. With the time and parts I've put into the engine, I know I can outrun the cops if I need to. But I'm still not sure this is the right thing to do.

Emily's eyes go wide. "You have a bike?"

I can't tell if it's admiration or fear in her voice. I straddle the cycle, still unsure about just leaving a crime scene. Those guys attacked us, not the other way around.

Erick trots off toward his big silver truck and the four-wheeler in back. There's no way he's getting that thing out of here unnoticed.

Emily stands closer to me, poised on the balls of her feet like she's ready to run. The whole time she was fighting off our attackers, she was fierce. But now, her eyes are big and luminous. She's afraid.

Seeing her like that makes my insides clench.

Erick tosses something at her, and she catches it by reflex as it slams into her gut. A mud-splattered helmet that matches her jeans.

"Get her out of here," Erick orders me.

"Why don't we just tell the truth about what happened?"

"We can't..." Emily's indecision and fear is obvious in her hesitant words. She holds the helmet in one hand. "Please, can you take me home?"

I care about her. It's the overriding factor that makes me jam my helmet down onto my head.

The sirens are so loud now that I can't hear anything, especially with the helmet on. Lights start flashing on the walls. I kick the bike on.

Erick says something to her, but he's in profile to me and I can't make out his words. Something passes between them. A family thing?

Then she pulls on her helmet and throws her leg over the bike behind me.

"Hold on!" I shout.

I jam it into gear and blast up the row of the parking garage. I go up, because I know the cops will be looking for someone going down, past them. Fortunately, this is one of those one-way garages.

On the next level, we buzz through the rows of cars, then descend through the empty exit ramp. The cops haven't blockaded it yet.

I speed through the mall traffic and onto city streets and suddenly we're clear.

Emily clings to me the whole time. Even with everything else going on, the three dead people back in the garage, the police chasing me, I am still so intensely aware of her.

There's going to be hell to pay later tonight. Coming off an adrenaline rush like this will throw my joints out of whack. I may not be able to walk tomorrow.

She's got a lot of explaining to do. Who were those guys, and why did we run?

But at this moment, with her arms around my waist...

All of this might be worth it.

## 5 - Brett

Halfway to Emily's ritzy neighborhood, and I'm still waiting for the police helicopter to shine a light down on us, or a group of squad cars to appear, blocking our way.

But nothing happens.

I'm trying to reconcile everything in my mind. We were leaving the mall, minding our own business, when some guy attacks Emily, and his friends come after Erick and me. Knives are drawn. I saw Erick with one, but was it his? Or did he get it from his opponent? And somehow, our three attackers ended up dead.

Oh, and they seemed to be... superhuman. With fangs.

But shouldn't we have stayed and talked to the cops? Told our side of the story? How come Erick stayed to take the blame? Why did Emily let him?

All of it whirls through my brain, rushing like the wind against me on the bike. I can't make sense of any of it

And still, no cops. Nothing happens at all.

Nothing except Emily clings to me, leaning into every turn like she was born to be on the back of a bike. With me.

This afternoon was supposed to be a last hurrah. Get her out of my system.

And she did insult me, ignore me, and basically make it known that she's not interested.

Except.

Except there was that moment in the dressing room, and another when we fought together.

Can I take hope from two measly seconds in an afternoon of her obvious dislike?

I don't know.

I've spent too much time mooning over Emily. Either she's interested or she isn't. I'm ready to move forward—or move on.

She's a hard nut to crack. She keeps everything so close. We were friends when her dad died and I don't remember her crying. Not once.

We hit a residential area that's a notorious speed trap, and I shift the bike to a lower gear. After all the effort to avoid the cops, it would suck to get pulled over for speeding now.

The road winds a little, then we hit a straightaway that dips through some woods. It's twilight and beautiful. Fireflies blink in a slow, dazy dance.

We're only doing thirty, and at the slow speed, Emily removes one of her arms from my waist.

What's she doing?

It's clear ahead of me, so I turn my head and see her reaching out, waving her fingers in the wind like a little kid.



Like she's having fun.

It's only a few seconds before we hit the end of the woodsy area, but I can't help myself.

I slow down and pull a u-turn right in the street. This time, when we drive back through the fireflies, I drive as slowly as I can without spilling the bike onto the asphalt.

The fireflies thicken around us.

I look back again.

She's leaning out to the side a little, and I'm at the perfect angle to see her eyes through the visors in both our helmets.

Her gaze is unfocused, far-off. Maybe she's lost in a memory or something.

*This is why I'm still in love with her, even after all the cold shoulders.*

Emily is magic.

I hit the end of the street and turn down a side street, putting us back on track to reach her house after the little detour.

And my gut is tight as a rock.

I know. I'm going to find out what she's hiding. Why we left Erick to take the fall for those three dead guys.

I'm not walking away from Emily.

Not without a fight.

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