

TAINED

Book I: Apprentices of Merlin

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Prologue

He held in his hand four stones. He hoped that they would know how to use them. He hoped they learned from his stories. If they never saw the truth, then he was lost. All would be lost. He held in his hand four stones which contained all his hopes.

Part I: The Main Players

Chapter I: The Artist

Claudia Paradis was a regular teenage girl with a big imagination and a heart to match. Neither of those things was helping her at the moment.

Claudia Paradis also had skin the color of snow which was the cause of her problems right now. Her cheeks were the color of a sun burnt penguin as her mother always told her. Her pale, freckled face always picked the worst times to flush up. Then, the attention it drew made the shade of red worse. Claudia immediately hid behind her easel and stared down at her scuffed boots. Not that this helped. Mrs. McMurray stood in front of her art work and praised it loudly before the entire class of students. Claudia loathed this.

“This is what you should be doing. Don’t keep your nose to the paper. You will miss what you are seeing,” Mrs. McMurray finished and pushed her thin rimmed glasses up her crooked nose. The stout woman silenced for a minute and started to shuffle her wide hips and jangling gypsy skirt around the room. Claudia thought she looked like a Weeble. The woman wobbles but doesn’t fall down.

“Good, she can go embarrass somebody else,” Claudia whispered to her friend, CJ. She picked up a charcoal bit again with her slender fingers and started to work on her still life.

CJ shook his head putting down his charcoal in exasperation. He was not an artist, “Hey, you’re the one who wanted to do this summer class. At least you are gold to her.”

“Don’t complain about being here, I agreed to Shakespeare with you against my better judgment,” Claudia reminded him and could see his face cringing as Mrs. McMurray made her way over to him. He missed Claudia wrinkling her nose after sneaking a peek at his canvas. There was supposed to be a fruit bowl on the page. The drawing looked more like a bowl of Playdough beat up by a room of three year olds.

CJ brushed his dusty, blonde hair back behind his ears leaving a charcoal mark across his face. After Claudia pointed it out to him, CJ took the corner of his white Foo Fighters concert shirt and tried to remove the blemish. He didn’t notice the movement flashed the class his skinny waist. Claudia didn’t notice like the other girls in the class. Looking at boys was okay, but looking at CJ was gross. They had been best friends since they were five.

Adolescence was bad enough at thirteen, but CJ thought that was Mrs. McMurray ridicule him in an optional summer course was probably worse. He closed his foggy blue eyes and held his breath in anticipation of McMurray’s first cringing words. Christopher Jacob Storm was out of his element. If there was a real option, he would be at home reading the latest Neil Gaiman book rather than in this art class. The only reason his presence was there was because his best friend, Claudia, wanted company. The third member of their trio of friends, Alexis Lange, refused to take the course with them leaving CJ subject to all of McMurray’s criticism.

“CJ, I guess you really should stick to model ships,” Claudia put her arm on his shoulder as the teacher made her swoop between CJ and his masterpiece. McMurray’s chunky fingers were dirty with pencil lead: Claudia thought they were the hands of a seasoned artist. They were just dirty to most people. Her reasoning was somewhat correct; somehow Ms. McMurray made CJ’s work look a thousand times better in two motions.

“Mr. Storm, you really need to open your eyes and see the world around you,” her voice was semi-loud which made a few other students chuckle. A loud huff of breath exhaled as CJ let it out. The comment wasn’t nearly as bad as he predicted. The last time he had been told that his work made her grandson look like a genius. Pink speckles started to stretch across Claudia’s face, who was embarrassed for him; however, CJ

didn't care about what McMurray said. At least McMurray's grandson wasn't a genius today.

"Oh, CJ, I'm sorry for making you do this," Claudia put her hands over her face in empathy. Her icy blues then stared out between her ring covered fingers towards him. A grin stretched across her face only after he laughed a bit. Claudia had genuinely been worried that CJ would finally be mad about Ms. McMurray's comments. When she had asked CJ to take the class with her, she had thought he'd have fun. After the fourth class, Claudia was concerned that CJ wasn't going to be a good sport and was going to end up despising her by the end of the summer.

"It's okay. I'll have my revenge with Hamlet. Besides, sometimes I think this is fun," CJ grinned at her and tore the sheet off of his drawing pad when McMurray announced the lesson was over with a sigh of relief.

"I wish she wouldn't constantly be over my shoulder though," Claudia shrugged and brushed her short, faux-reddish pigtail off her shoulder. Her art was good; although, she would never admit it was good. The saying was true for Claudia: she was indeed her own worst critic. Nothing was ever right when it came to her art work. A shadow is off. The red isn't red enough. There was always some excuse as to why she couldn't accept the compliment and be proud of her work.

CJ rolled his eyes to the ceiling and then looked at her, "You are so doom and gloom. Have a little faith sometime, Claudia."

"I could say the same for you, Mr. Girls Suck," She joked biting the fingernail on her thumb, only slightly noticing the light charcoal taste on her skin since it was lined in the dark dust from her tool. After jumping up onto her artist's stool, her foot began tapping the rungs waiting for the next assignment, "You've been eying Elisabeth over there for two weeks. Just talk to her."

CJ hooted and then slapped his hand on his knee. Leaning over to her he whispered, "Right after you go over there and talk to Geoffrey Kline."

Just the mentions of Geoffrey Kline, made Claudia scan the room to look for him. He had been sitting in between two girls who seemed to drool anytime he may have glanced their way. They weren't just two girls in her mind. If in times of Greek art, she

was pretty sure that these two girls would have been used as models for goddess perfection. How could she compete with that?

Claudia wasn't as elegant or graceful. Her hair wasn't long and blonde but messily layered and dark red. Their ears were full of shining diamonds that their rich daddies bought for them while Claudia had three earring holes filled with the "buy one get one free" special from the mall. Goddess faultlessness versus artist flaws wasn't exactly the debate Claudia wanted to get into. From a distance, she would watch him. That way, she wouldn't have to worry about a rejection that didn't happen.

"Why would he want to go out with me over tweedle dum and tweedle dee?" Claudia sighed darting her gaze away when Geoffrey's green eyes hit hers.

"Do I really need to answer that?" CJ whispered as Ms. McMurray started talking to the classroom. After a quick huff, Claudia shook her head. Her friend was right, but that wasn't going to change her mind. After all, CJ shouldn't be giving out advice. He was afraid to talk to any girl since Allison Nelson dumped him.

"AHEM," the old lady's throat cleared and all attention was turned back to the center of the room. The fruit bowl the class was drawing was no longer there. Instead, two chairs were resting back to back. She instructed them that it will return the next week for those who needed to finish.

"What's next then? Chairs are boring." He whispered to Claudia. This was her element so he figured she'd know. Sure enough, Claudia flipped through a neatly folded paper and found their work for the week. Silently, she handed him the sheet, and his eyes widened so much that he was sure they'd fall out of their sockets. Sounding flustered, "Models? I can't draw nude models. That's just wrong. Why am I taking this class again?"

"Because I agreed to read classic literature with you," Claudia reminded him and pointed to the library book halfway hanging out of his messenger bag with her thumb. A grin spread across her face, "Besides, when in Rome..."

"Now class, I don't want any of you to have to worry or be embarrassed," The teacher announced pushing open a door to the cloak room.

"Too late," CJ hid his face behind his easel like several of the other, young students.

Claudia looked annoyed and ignored him. Her eyes wandered around the room to see who was being a baby and she briefly caught the glare of Geoffrey Kline: her heart leapt up into her throat. His eyes were a bright and radiating green from the sunlight pouring into the windows. After her heart came back down to its normal place, she quickly looked away at the teacher. Her cheeks were getting warm again.

“Because many of you are under age, I was prohibited against nude models despite my better wishes. You will have to excuse their swimsuits,” Ms. McMurray was utterly disgusted at the school’s decision. An audible sigh of relief echoed in the room. Claudia shrugged. Either way, she would draw. Art is art.

After twenty minutes, a short break was announced. Claudia grumbled when the models moved. Her head was really into her work and wasn’t ready for a trip to the water fountain. CJ whispered in her ear as they went to wash their hands, “Just go ask him if he wants to come to the movies with us tonight. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“He can say no and laugh, and then I have to avoid him for the next eleven classes,” she frowned and wished CJ would just let the subject drop. He did and left to go get a soda from the vending machines. Of course, the absence of CJ didn’t matter because her heart jumped up into her throat a second later.

Geoffrey squeezed by her to wash the charcoal dust off his hands as she was drying hers. After a quick smile of acknowledgement he complimented her work, “Your stuff is really good, Claudia. Why are you in here with us losers?”

Her cheeks started to get a little hot. She really hoped he wouldn’t notice. He’d probably notice her heart beating louder than that Main Street parade first. Nervously, Claudia pushed a piece of her hair behind her ear, “Oh, thanks... I... ah. I, um, well, thought I needed to learn more.”

He smiled a charmingly crooked smile and flicked the water off his hands into the sink, “I’m sure you could teach her a thing or to.” He cocked his head towards the teacher.

Geoffrey Kline was two years older than Claudia and she felt that he had eyes a writer dreams about. At least, that’s what she told Alexis. CJ wanted no part of her dreamy rambling.

She thought Geoffrey had a good eye for shadows and lines compared to the rest of the class. He also had a good eye for fashion always looking his best when he showed up to class. There was no way Claudia could compete with the girls who hung all over him. She reminded herself that he was an artist and they do look at things differently. Maybe... just maybe...

“Oh, hey,” Claudia suddenly had a burst of bravery, “Me and some friends...”

She was cut off by tweedle dee coming up and wrapping her arm around Geoffrey’s in a fit of blatant flirting. Britney Taylor had no redeeming qualities in Claudia’s book. She was one of the girls who were in this class because they failed during the school year. Art class was just a joke to her, a joke that she failed. Now she was full of complaints and snide comments every morning. Not to mention, her bouncy blonde curls were always around Geoffrey. Britney gave Claudia one of those fake smiles which revealed teeth that were clearly a fake white. Claudia frowned and glared at Britney’s expression. She could read it all over the blonde’s face. **BACK OFF, HE’S MINE.** So Claudia did.

“Oh, hey, Brit,” His voice was somewhat annoyed at her presence but he didn’t shoo her away, “What were you going to say Claudia?”

Claudia shrugged losing her edge completely, “Oh nothing important.”

“You should go find your boyfriend before class starts, Claudia. Ms. McMurray needs somebody to pick on,” Brit dragged Geoffrey away before he could hear Claudia reply with a hiss; “He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Gr,” Claudia stomped her foot and glared after Britney, “What a...”

Chapter II: The Thinker

“That was really not cool,” Claudia frowned retelling the story outside of the school. She wondered if Alexis was even listening. Her chestnut haired friend was attempting to tackle CJ to the ground. Claudia just rolled her eyes and went on talking, “I just don’t understand why I even try. My *best friends* seem to be paint brushes these days.”

Claudia put emphasis on the “*best friends*” part of her speech which prompted Alexis to let CJ go. He lost his balance and fell on his behind. She grinned and tossed Claudia a soccer ball, “Take it out on the goalie.”

“Wonderful advice,” Claudia barely caught it in her hands. She put it under her arm and dreaded going to soccer with Alexis that afternoon. Even though Alexis had refused to go to art classes with her and CJ, Claudia still agreed to play soccer that summer with Lex. Claudia was the artist and Alexis was the sports super star. It was her turn to feel out of place.

CJ picked himself up off the ground, “Way to help out the self confidence here.”

“Well don’t be talking dirt on my mom. Not my fault she actually wants me to do something with her,” Alexis jabbed him in the arm. Their scuffle had preceded CJ making fun of her for not coming out to the movies with him and Claudia. CJ’s smile faded after Alexis’ comment, though. Family matters hit a cord with him and the girls saw the change in his demeanor.

“Ceej, I didn’t mean it like that,” Alexis put her hand on his shoulder feeling really bad about her choice in words. Nobody really knew how CJ felt about his family since he never talked much about it. There was a comment here about his dad on his case or a comment there about his step mom being a real witch. Neither Claudia nor Alexis wanted to push him on the subject. Both knew, though, that he didn’t get along with his parents like they did with their own.

CJ shrugged and said in a subdued voice, “Yea, I’ll see you guys after soccer. Dad just got back from Los Angeles and wants to see me.”

He walked off with a half wave of the hand before either girl could say anything. They just looked at each other not knowing what to say. Alexis read the look on Claudia’s face, and put her hands up to her shoulders in an ‘I’m innocent’ pose.

“I didn’t,” She started but stopped when Claudia chucked the soccer ball into her stomach. Reflexes allowed her to catch it before the ball really hurt.

“Alexis Elizabeth Lange, you did to know what you were saying. You also knew how sensitive CJ is about it,” Claudia flopped her bag of art stuff onto the ground and took her tennis shoes out of her bag in jerky, angry motions.

Still pleading her innocence, “I’m sorry, Claudia! I can’t freaking sidestep around everything. It’s not my fault his dad is a real tool.”

“Oh stop being so defensive, Lex. You’re his friend so act like it. He’ll talk to us when he wants to talk to us. Come on, we’re going to be late.”

The truth was that CJ didn’t want to talk about it to anybody ever. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust his friends or think he couldn’t talk to them about it. It was that his friends and anything outside the house were his only relief from his family life. Those two worlds needed to stay separate for his sanity.

While on his bike home, he wondered if he could just run away. Maybe there was some place nearby he could hide out so his friends would still be near. Those two meant more to him than his family and were the only things that kept him from truly running from it all. Claudia had been his friend since they were still on training wheels. Alexis came later, but she still meant as much. They were there when he needed them, and that meant they were family to him.

Claudia and Alexis were more of a family to him than his biological one. Three things mattered to his father: money, the family name, and CJ’s step brother. Nowhere in his father’s list of priorities was CJ’s name. If anything, he came maybe twentieth which ranked somewhere with vegetables for dinner and the color of wallpaper in the dining room.

CJ wasn’t the only one who grew tired of his father. Madeline Storm, CJ’s mother, left her husband five years ago. She had met somebody else and was tired of Mr. Storms’ antics. CJ assumed she was tired of him too since she left with no warning.

Never being the dream child his father had in mind, he truly did believe his mother didn’t want him. He was a geek in school and was picked on rather than being the popular sports star that they always dreamed of as some parents tend to do. Genes definitely gave him his dad’s better than average looks. However, CJ never found any

girls interested in reading Beowulf or Lord of the Rings with him. The only one who ever was interested was pretending so she could pass her finals or was Claudia.

Four years ago, Emily Reston Storm was officially made the new mother of the house. Three years ago, Lucas Reston-Storm made CJ virtually invisible in his own home. And the combination of the two made CJ's home a place he would rather forget.

"CJ, your father has been waiting for you for at least ten minutes," Emily yelled out from the kitchen sounding annoyed. It was only ten minutes, but punctuality was everything especially with CJ. CJ could hear slamming cabinets. She always did this to try to intimidate CJ when she thought he was being a pest and wanted to give the illusion that the world was ending. For some reason, the threat of his father was supposed to instill the wrath of God. CJ thought his father's wrath to be a joke. It merely ever constituted in a reduction of allowance because money was prize number one to Mr. Storm.

He just rolled his eyes and hung his bag in the front closet, "I'm sorry, Emily. Class ran long."

Her voice squawked in a tone he was sure only dogs could hear, "I thought we told you to call me Mother. Show some respect boy."

"You're not my mother," He reminded her in a calm tone. A shouting match with Emily never really worked out for the better.

"I'm the only mother you've had for five years. What has that woman done for you?"

"CJ! COME HERE!" His father yelled out from behind a thick maple door off of the front foyer.

CJ sunk his shoulders low and walked to his dad's office. He let himself in and coughed at the cigar smoke filtering around a ceiling fan. The room was stiff and uncomfortable. The design was meant to keep children out. The furniture was heavy and dark with stiff chairs except for the one his dad was sitting in, of course.

His dad pointed to one of the evil chairs and put his cigar in an ashtray, "CJ, I told you to stop provoking your mother. It is very stressful to her."

CJ's mouth started to open as his mind wanted to protest the statement, but he quickly shut it in a thin, tight line. Sometimes it was best not to argue. Sometimes it

was better for him to keep it inside. After all, an argument kept CJ in the presence of his father even longer. CJ wanted out of the room as quickly as possible.

Michael Storm was a walking contradiction, CJ thought. That fact made his father almost comical to him. His father was a man who looked handsome about ten years ago. Despite a pudgy belly and receding hairline, Michael thought he was a gift to all women on the planet. Mr. Storm saw something completely different in the mirror which was aided by the fact that Emily wasn't a bad looking woman. All she saw about Michael was his bank account.

Only being a kid, an ignored one at that, CJ didn't feel it was his duty to make the observation. Not that Mr. Storm would have listened. Emily Reston put more class into their family name as Michael tended to remind CJ.

"I'm sorry that I missed helping you during the school elections. My business trip took a longer time than I had thought," Michael said with a tone that sounded mostly condescending.

CJ didn't say anything in response. He had only run for class president at the end of school year because his father wouldn't shut up about it. The idea of being president of the freshman class was appealing to CJ. He liked the thought of working to make the school better for students. It would also be an intellectual challenge for him.

When push came to shove, CJ convinced himself that he didn't want it or wouldn't be good at it. Much like Claudia with her art, CJ found ten reasons that weren't truly valid to discourage him. He wasn't smart enough. He wasn't much of a leader. He wasn't creative enough.

Besides, he wasn't nearly popular enough especially after Allison dumped him for Brett Meyers, the football star. Rumors started to fly that she was only dating CJ to help her pass the eighth grade. Deep down, CJ felt that it was the truth although he really had hoped it was peer pressure from her friends and not being used. None of that, he was planning on telling his father. Michael Storm was so elated that the head cheerleader was dating his son, who he had almost given up hope on; CJ thought he was going to throw a party.

“Your mother told me that you didn’t win. Next year you will try again and will win. When I was your age at North Abingdon, I was president of my class every year. We need to keep the Storm name strong there.”

CJ wanted to tell him that it was pretty lame to obsess over his high school years over two decades later, but he didn’t. He just commented, “Brett Meyers is pretty popular and deserved to win. His name gets him everybody’s attention.”

“Well Brett Meyers is not a Storm. You should be out there making yourself known. Look at all the friends you had when you and Allison were dating. Things were on such an up swing. What happened to the both of you?”

CJ was stupid not to assume that Emily hadn’t published a newsflash about the breakup, “She’s just not my type, Dad.”

“What *is* your type, Christopher? You hang out with those girls too much. You should find other friends to socialize with. You’re even taking art classes with that Paradis girl. My son taking art classes, what’s next? Ballet?”

“Claudia. You know her name. We’ve been friends since grade school. And I’m taking the class as a favor. You didn’t object when you offered to pay for it. Mom never had a problem with the Paradis family.”

“Whatever. The point is, Christopher, if you want to succeed you need to start aligning yourself with people who will make you succeed. I didn’t get to where I am by being second place and by hanging out with the rejects.”

CJ was beyond offended and tried very hard not to yell at his father, “Those are my friends. They’re better friends than Allison and her groupies ever were. Those girls just wanted me to help them write their reports. What kind of friends are those?”

His father shook his head clearly exasperated, “They are still the right kind of friends. They’re the ones who will take your places. Christopher, I do everything for you. One day you’re going to be out there on your own. I won’t be there providing for you. You weren’t even valedictorian of your class this year. What are you going to do in high school? Second best isn’t going to cut it when it comes time to pay the piper.”

Clenching his jaw, CJ refused to let his father see how much his words were hurting, “I was second place, and not by much. I thought I did pretty well out of three hundred kids.”

“Christopher, you just never get it. I don’t know what to do with you. I hope we don’t have problems like this with Lucas. I don’t think your mother could handle two underachievers.”

CJ stood up visibly upset at this point. He wanted to scream at his father that Emily was not his mother. He wanted to slam his fists on the desk and tell his father that he wasn’t an underachiever. He wanted to throw things and scream that Claudia was a better person than anybody he had ever known. His father had no clue about the world outside of his office at home or in the hospital. CJ so dearly wanted to scream, but he was above that. It wasn’t like he expected to leave the room with any other emotion towards his father, “I need to go. I’m meeting Claudia and Lex.”

His father let out an audible sigh, rolled his eyes, and shoed CJ away like a fly, “Fine, go. No wonder Madeline left. You are a ridiculously intolerable boy.”

The door slammed as CJ left the room in a hurried huff. He stopped outside the door for a moment looking up at the ceiling and trying not to let the forming tears of frustration roll down his face. It was below him to cry, and he would not give his father the satisfaction of knowing that he got to him. Mr. Storm had a way of tearing out his heart and placing a few well placed jumps on it.

When CJ’s eyes fell back down to eye level, his eyes scanned the room for something else to take his focus. He needed to pause and collect himself, make his mind go blank and not think about his father. A painting that Emily was adjusting on the living room wall completely transfixed his gaze and became his focal point. Mr. Storm was completely gone from CJ’s head.

He had seen that painting somewhere before like he dreamt it. Of course, the water lilies had been in any text book that spoke of artwork, but this was different. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he saw the scene somewhere else. Not as a painting, but as a reality. He knew he had a dream about it and since he didn’t remember dreams too well, it was going to drive him crazy. Unthinking, his feet brought him to Emily’s side by the painting.

“Do you like it? Your father brought it home for me. He knows how much I enjoy fine art,” Emily spoke in her airy way.

CJ barely listened to Emily, but he knew very well that she only liked the price tag on the work. It was a status symbol, an ill placed status symbol. Some true art lover should have it. Emily just wanted to put on heirs for all of her fake friends. Their home was in the center of middle class suburbia. Yet, she wanted to create an elite home.

There was only one reason they still remained in the middle class neighborhood. If Emily had her way, they would have left as soon as the marriage certificate was signed. A move to another region would mean the legacy of the Storm name would be unknown. Michael had to make sure that his name carried on at North Abingdon High School. CJ was also pretty sure that they just wanted to look better than everybody else around them.

“Yea, it’s really nice,” CJ mumbled as the flowers seemed to reach out at him as that *déjà vu* feeling wouldn’t go away. For an instant, it was as if they really did start swirling around a pond. Monet’s work became like a Magic Eye trick where the secret image jumped out at you. *Where have I seen this before?* He broke his thoughts as Emily was trying to have a conversation with him. He knew she had just wanted to sound smarter than he.

“Renoir is such a masterful artist.”

“Monet,” CJ corrected and realized he had seen particular print in an art book Claudia was showing him in their class. She was going on about how it was her favorite of the water lily paintings. He never had his friends over at his house otherwise he knew she’d appreciate it more than Emily ever would.

“You know what I meant,” She snipped and went back into the kitchen like a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

CJ stifled a laugh and left the house. He didn’t plan on telling them he was leaving. They really didn’t care. As he stepped outside, the thresh hold of their house seemed to bring a tremendous weight off his chest. Freedom. Outside, away from them, that was freedom.

Chapter III: The Athlete

“I can’t believe you faked me out,” Alexis threw a soccer ball into the air, caught it, and looped it around her back. She was prancing around in front of Claudia who was rubbing a bandaged elbow, “Dude, you were awesome. You said you were never going to make a good goalie.”

Claudia winced in pain and stopped rubbing her elbow. She was forced into the goalie position at the beginning of the summer league by lack of volunteers. The position wasn’t the easiest. Claudia would have preferred to be a defenseman or a benchwarmer, but she wasn’t a totally close-minded person and figured something new would be fun. Now that she had a huge grass burn on her arm, she wasn’t entirely sure how fun it was. Once the pain went away, soccer would look less bleak.

“Don’t get your hopes up too high,” Claudia shook her head, “I just agreed to play for the summer.”

“It’ll stick to you like flies on paper.”

Claudia furrowed her brow a bit and wrinkled her nose, “Nice visual.”

Alexis rolled her eyes and flipped her ponytail. She tossed the ball to Claudia, “Whatever. I’m sorry my visuals aren’t as good as yours. It’ll stick to you. Won’t be able to get it out of your system.”

Claudia caught the ball now that she had her hands warmed up and tossed it back to her friend, “I doubt I’d like it that much, but I admit it’s better than I thought it would be. At least you didn’t ask me to join the swim team. I probably wouldn’t make it halfway across the pool.”

“Yea, you’d probably be swimming with the fishes,” Alexis laughed and pushed away her reminder that she should have joined the team as well.

The two girls walked and joked as they walked towards their street. Gold Street was lined with tall, green trees that shaded the road. A few cars lined the sidewalk and a boy on his bicycle road away from them.

“If this street were any more perfect looking, I’d think we were walking into that movie *Pleasantville* or a Stephen King novel,” Claudia joked as they both briefly stopped on the corner. That was the thing about North Abingdon. It was your perfect little town. Very little trouble and all houses had their little picket fences.

“Or the Twilight Zone,” Alexis shrugged not having as many references as Claudia and led the way down the sidewalk. When they neared her house, she looked at the slowly overgrown grass, “Oh, I forgot, I’ll hook up with you and Ceej later, before you guys go out. I promised my mum I’d do some stuff for her.”

Claudia understood and nodded with her response, “It’s cool. Do you want any help?”

“Nah, I’ll be cool. I’ll catch up with you guys about two-ish,” Alexis waved and ran up her own walkway into the house. Claudia said a quick goodbye and continued home.

Silence. Alexis Lange’s house was always quiet when she came home. Noises would be out of the ordinary and would be alarming to her. The silence didn’t bother Alexis anymore. She knew that her mother was doing the best she could to take care of their home. A single mother never has it easy. She knew that Stacie Lange wanted to be home more, but they wanted a roof over their heads, didn’t they?

Alexis appreciated what her mother was doing for her. Stacie Lange was a kindergarten teacher during the school year, and to help pay the remainder of the bills she worked a summer retail job while not in school and taught some summer school classes. Not many kids her age would understand. Alexis did understand although it wasn’t always easy. She recognized how exhausted her mother was every night. A few years ago, she would throw tantrums about her mother not being at her swim meets.

“She’s never here. Everybody else has their folks,” Alexis grumped with her arms crossed while flopping onto a bench. In her huff, she pulled her latex swimming cap off her head roughly. A few hairs pulled from their roots. Not to break her sour face, she didn’t show that it really had hurt.

This was her final race of the year. Her mother had promised to be there. The relay that Alexis swam was fighting to be the best in the district. Alexis was the anchor of the team. She was the last swimmer and could make or break the race. Her mother promised. Stacie Lange was stuck at work because her relief was late. She had already missed the other meaningless races Alexis was in. The big one was starting in a few minutes.

“She promised,” Alexis was almost to tears and a panic attack when Mrs. Paradis sat down beside her. Claudia and her mother often attended Alexis’ events as a favor to Stacie. Their parents had been friends for a long time even if Alexis and Claudia hadn’t always been friends.

Putting her arm around Alexis’ wet shoulders she said in her gentle voice, “Lex, your mother wants to be here very much. I know she’s upset that she might miss your race. She’s so proud of you and what you’re doing.”

“Mrs. P, you don’t get it. I just,” Alexis didn’t finish what she was going to say.

“I know. You just want her to see your last race. She wants to see it to, but unfortunately, when you’re grown up you have to deal with grown up things... like late coworkers. She can’t exactly leave the store empty. Your mother is working so that you will be taken care of... so that you can swim and play soccer.”

Honestly, anything Mrs. Paradis said fell on mostly deaf ears. The truth about her mother working didn’t matter to a twelve year old girl. None of what Mrs. Paradis said mattered until Lex was standing on the starting block waiting for her teammate to touch the wall. A brief scan through the crowd gave her all the strength she needed. Her mother was pushing through the crowd out of breath and looking for her daughter. It clicked in Alexis’ head how hard her mother had to fight to be there for her and how hard her mother had to work to put her on the swimming block.

The relay team ended up winning that day, Alexis fought to the end for her mother. Another medal to put on her wall, but the most rewarding part was having her mother there in the end. That was all Alexis really wanted. There were still some tantrums after that day, but her feelings about her mother working all the time started to improve. The least she could do in appreciation was to do the chores requested of her. Mowing the lawn or polishing the furniture didn’t bother Alexis. It was her way of saying ‘thank you.’

“Mail call,” Alexis said and picked up the mail that her mother left on the table. One of the envelopes had her name on it. Of course, it was open, “Nosy mum.”

Dear Alexis,

“Bla... bla... bla...” Alexis skimmed to the important part. She hated reading excess words.

We reviewed your race times with the Abingdon Middle School swim team, and we would like for you to try out for the North Abingdon High junior varsity team. Practices begin on July 10th. Tryouts begin on July 15th. Please contact me at...

Alexis crumbled the paper up and threw it in the trash. She didn't want to try out for the team. They must not have seen her times at the regional finals. There was no way the coaches would want such a loser on their team. Why put herself through the heartbreak or put them through the frustration? After walking away from the trash can, she hesitated. She turned back and pulled the letter back out. A small doubt about her decision made her put it in the office desk.

"Just in case, I guess," She shrugged but convinced herself that there would be no 'just in case.'

After putting the thought behind her, Alexis went down into the basement to get the lawn mower from the garage. The overgrown grass was the first priority of the afternoon. Their lawn was getting too long for the neighbor's standards. It was so fun having a neighborhood committee. It was fun like having a cavity. Last month, thankfully, they requested that her mother removed a tacky lawn goose from the yard. It was the kind that people enjoyed putting sweaters on in the winter and Santa hats on at Christmas. The old ladies liked this neighborhood to be on the next side of Perfectville.

As Alexis jumped down the steps into the basement, her eyes were attracted to some boxes of junk by the doorway. The reason she was so enamored with them was because they were closet boxes her mother never let her go through. Each of them had been sitting at base of the closet in the master bedroom covered with piles of laundry. As much as Alexis asked to see things about her mother's childhood, she was denied just the same.

Her mother didn't want to talk about the past. It was painful because she was estranged from her parents and her first husband. Alexis barely knew anything about her father or her mother's family. For all she knew, they were all locked up in the local nut house or big house. It hurt for Alexis not to know, but she had to back off and not press the issue with her mother. True, she could have gone through the boxes on her own. She just didn't because she knew she'd end up with more questions than answers.

Standing beside them she realized that this was her last chance to see the contents of the boxes. They were there for a reason: to be thrown away. Her mother labeled them with things like “trash” and “old junk” so that there was no question of her intention.

Might be interesting, Alexis thought, I wonder what old stuff mom has.

Alexis was thinking about it so hard that she jumped when the phone rang upstairs in the kitchen. She looked up the long, dusty stairwell debating whether or not to answer it. *It's probably Mom. I should get it,* she told herself. After one glance back at the boxes, she went up to the tiny kitchen with a mental note that she was going to look in them.

The caller ID flashed green with the name “HELLER CLOTHES.” That was definitely her mother calling. Stacie worked insane hours during the summer between the clothing store and helping with summer school students. Even though Alexis understood that she needed provided for, she wondered if Stacie replaced the need for friends and family with her work.

“Hey,” Alexis answered as she put the phone to her ear.

“Hi, honey. I was just calling to make sure you get the lawn for me today,” Stacie sounded distracted while the murmurings of customers went on in the background.

Feeling a bit undervalued, Alexis rolled her eyes and answered, “I didn’t forget.”

“Okay, thanks. Hey, I saw you got a letter from the JV swim team. I really think you should consider trying out.”

“I already said I wasn’t going to,” She answered in an exasperated tone and put her hand on her hip in a defensive pose even though her mother couldn’t see it.

“Alexis, I really don’t understand why you are being so stubborn. You lost one race compared to dozens that you’ve won. It doesn’t matter to them. You’re good and they know it.”

“When push came to shove, I lost the most important race of the year. I don’t want to deal with it again. They’re not going to want a choker on their team and a loser.”

Stacie started talking to some women on the background. Alexis didn’t even know if her mother was really listening to anything she was saying, “It’s your choice,

then. You're old enough to make that decision on your own. That's the last I'll ask you about it. How was soccer? Is Claudia having fun with you?"

"Yea, she's actually pretty good but she'll never join the high school team. Too into art and stuff."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Well, I need to get going. I'll be home around 6. What do you want for dinner? I can pick something up."

Home cooked meals weren't a norm in their house unless Alexis started cooking them herself, "Whatever you want. You know what I like."

"Okay, see you later. Oh, and put the boxes in the basement out to the trash."

The line went dead. Alexis rolled her eyes again hating the pressure her mother had kept putting onto her about swimming. Alexis half wanted to tear up that paper the JV team sent to spite her mother. Instead, she went back downstairs, passed the boxes, and pulled the lawn mower out of the garage.

The afternoon was exceptionally warm. Every piece of pollen and errant blade of grass managed to stick to Alexis' sweat covered face. She felt dirty, extremely dirty when she was finished. Usually these things wouldn't bother her. A good sweat after a soccer game was a good thing, but mowing the lawn was a chore. Chores made the dirty feeling much worse. The afternoon continued with a shower, and then her focus would become those boxes again.

Chapter IV: The Strength

The phone was ringing. The littlest sister was whining. The little sister was in his seat. The mother was barking from the kitchen for somebody to answer the darn phone. Danny hated being the older brother. It had its benefits, but it always seemed like he was the one who had to take care of his sisters and the house. This exact moment was no exception.

“Daniel Evan, will you please get the phone,” Patricia Paradis yelled from the kitchen. From the smell of things, she was baking one of her famous apple pies. From the sound of her frustration, her work wasn’t for the children. Otherwise she would have run out of the kitchen in a second. It was probably for the community fair. He wished it was for them, his mouth was watering.

Claudia couldn’t get the phone because she was helping Julia work on a project for summer camp. Julia just plain wasn’t allowed to answer the phone because she was five. And well, Danny just didn’t feel like it.

“Fine,” He grunted in that football player sort of way and ripped the phone out of its holder.

“Daniel, don’t give me that tone,” Mrs. Paradis had the ears of a hawk especially when her kids said something they shouldn’t have.

“What?” He said into the phone not really caring who was on the line and ignoring his mother. It wasn’t one of his friends. They call the phone in his room. As soon as he turned fourteen, two years ago, he convinced his parents he needed his own. Danny also found it funny that they refuse to get Claudia her own which is one victory of his sister. Of course, he never thought that they only did it because they were tired of he and his girlfriend hogging the phone line all day.

“DANIEL, DON’T TALK TO PEOPLE ON THE PHONE THAT WAY,” His mother yelled from the kitchen.

“Yea, Daniel, don’t talk to me like that,” The voice on the other line mocked him.

“Shut up. You want Claud?” His tone of voice changed. Alexis was one of Claudia’s friends he could stand. Any girl that could kick his butt at soccer had his respect. She was the only one he could carry a conversation with that came over. CJ wouldn’t know a football from a hockey puck.

“Yea, please. How’s football camp going? They going to bump you to Varsity this year? They should after the season you had last year,” She seemed either genuinely interested or really polite.

Danny motioned to Claudia to get the phone so she would get out of his seat on the couch. He was ready to dive onto it and start watching the movie he rented from the store. It was the latest car chase movie from Hollywood’s latest tough guy, Vince Lone. All of his buddies had seen it in the theatre. Danny didn’t because he was forced to watch his sisters that night. There was no way he was going to let Claudia ruin his viewing pleasure this time around.

“I’ll get it in a second. Let me finish this,” Claudia was busy scribbling something for Julia, who was coloring intensely on the floor.

Danny sighed hating that he was forced to have a conversation he didn’t want to have, “Camp is going okay. I’m pretty sure I’ll be on the varsity squad. Stewart Johnson can’t throw a ball through a twenty foot hoop two feet from his face.”

“Cool. You’re the best they’ve had in years,” Alexis followed the high school teams since she was a kid. There were no professional teams near North Abingdon so the community relished in their high school sports.

“That’s what they tell me. Here’s Claudia,” He slapped the phone into his sister’s hand, laughed that he left a sting on her hand, and bounded into his seat in front of the television. A sharp pain stuck into his leg as he sat down heavily. After shouting an obscenity, he pulled a pencil out from under him. It had jabbed him in the leg leaving a nice graphite mark.

“Great, give me lead poisoning before I make varsity,” He snapped at her.

“Well, don’t be such a jerk and look where you’re sitting,” Claudia gave him a dirty look.

He didn’t say anything to her but snapped the pencil in half with his right hand. He then threw it on the floor. Julia looked up from her work and protested, “Hey that was mine! You jerk!”

Danny didn’t say anything and flipped the movie onto the television. He only barked at Julia when she pounded him in the foot in revenge for the broken pencil.

Somewhere around now is when Mrs. Paradis stepped into the fight. And it usually went the same way.

“DANIEL, apologize to your sister. JULIA, if you do that again, you will go straight to your room.” Both of the children grunted an apology and then gave each other a dirty look.

“Wow that sounds like really neat stuff. Bring it over. I know CJ will want to see it too,” Claudia said into the phone.

Alexis pleaded a bit with Claudia, “Just don’t say anything to your mother. They’re friends and I don’t want my mom finding out I didn’t throw this away. Your mom won’t be there when I get there right?”

“Nope, and don’t worry about the other thing. I’ll be quiet.”

“Thanks. See you soon then.” Alexis hung up the phone.

Claudia put the phone back on its cradle and sat down with her sister. She was making illustrations for Julia to color in. That was one thing his sister was good at, art. Danny wasn’t totally a jerk. He could admit when somebody was good at something, even if it was his sister. At least when she was drawing, she was leaving him alone.

“Okay, I’m going to be out for a few hours helping set up for the fair. Danny, please keep an eye on your sisters. Claudia, come home right after the movie tonight. I’ll need your help baking tonight for tomorrow’s sale, sweetie. I didn’t get as much done as I thought,” Patricia came into the living room holding several pie boxes in her floury hands. She was in a hurry, but of course, that was enough time to argue even if it was hard sometimes. Patricia had a very soft voice like an angel that almost mesmerized everybody into agreeing with her... almost.

“But Mom, I’ve got a date,” Danny paused his movie and was really annoyed that he was stuck watching his sisters again, “Claudia is old enough to watch Julia. Why do I always have to do it?”

“Because, you, sir, are grounded and aren’t going anywhere to begin with. Or did you forget that you broke curfew last week while out with Lily?”

“But,” He stammered, “I was only ten minutes late.”

“You know the rules especially after you broke curfew the week before. And now you will stay home and you will watch your sisters.”

And that was the final word. Their mother was out the door before Danny could say anything else. He stamped his foot and turned off the television in anger. Parents were so frustrating, and his mother definitely ruined a very good movie.

“I don’t want to hear it,” Claudia said before he could start complaining, “I don’t exactly like the arrangement.”

“Well then at least we agree on something for once in your life,” He frowned.

“Why don’t you like watching me? I’m your favorite,” Julia said giving her irresistible cute grin. At the age of five, his littlest sister had mastered the artistry of being absolutely adorable. Her little dimples, the two front teeth missing, brown pigtails, and big baby blues all melted everybody who looked at her. Danny really wished he had another brother. The house needed more testosterone.

“I’m a football player not a babysitter,” he put his feet up on the couch, “So Claudia, what’s all the secretive stuff on the phone with Alexis?”

“Nothing,” She said bluntly which, of course, was a cry for him to press on.

“Nothing my left foot. When you end a conversation with an ‘I won’t tell,’ that means somebody’s up to something,” He said to her with no avail. Claudia didn’t give him an inch. Not that he really expected her to.

He decided already that as the overseer of the house he would use his position to see what they’re up to. If it was a secret, it was probably something he’d want word of. Blackmail tends to be good with younger sisters. Especially when he needs them to keep secrets for him... like the fact that he has been late every night he’s been out for the past week. Had he not known that Claudia and her friends were the reason the back window broke, he would have been grounded for a lot longer than the weekend.

So when Alexis came in with the box, he got up immediately and offered to carry it for her. The bottom really was going to give out on it which made his offer seem like a nice gesture rather than a manipulation. Danny put it on the dining room table and wondered himself what exactly was in a box called ‘old stuff.’ It was probably something stupid seeing that Claudia and CJ would be interested. But still, he wanted a little leverage for future use.

“Danny,” Alexis put her hand on the lid of the box before he can open it, “Please don’t tell. My mother wanted it trashed.”

“And what are you going to do for me?” He asked.

“Danny,” She said sharply and huffed.

He had never seen Alexis so serious about something that wasn’t a sport. He had to play nice. Her brown eyes were really pleading which added to how adamant she was about it. Although, Danny chuckled instead of being totally serious. This reminded him of a dream he had not too long ago with both of the girls in it.

“What’s so funny?” Alexis furrowed her brow annoyed that he was going to laugh at a serious request.

“No, it’s nothing to do with this box. I just remember I had a dream the other night with you two in it.”

“What are you talking about?” Claudia said in disbelief and sat down on one of the mahogany dining room chairs. She was almost laughing at the notion.

“Mock me if you will. I’m serious. I had a dream where I saved the both of you from some evil monster or something. Maybe it was a sign you’d be asking me to do you a favor now,” Danny was laughing himself at the absurdity of it.

“Did you hit it with a football?” Claudia joked and shook her head.

“No, stupid, I slayed it with a sword or something,” Danny spoke as if he were serious and then realized she was mocking him.

“This just gets better,” Claudia just shook her head and smiled. She ran her fingers over her short, messy pigtails and stared at the box, “Ignore him. Open it.”

Alexis took the lid off the box, and Danny groaned and lost interest in its contents immediately. Inside the box were a bunch of knickknacks and objects that looked like they came from the Celtic knick-knack store on Main Street. That was his sister’s deal, and not his. He never understood the artsy fascination with dragons and horses with horns. Claudia started rooting through the box pulling out things like quartz rocks, a velveteen cape, a hair clip shaped like a butterfly, and some other jewelry pieces. As much as he was disinterested, he thought his girlfriend might like one of the necklaces.

“Wow, your mother really hides her interests well,” Claudia was pretty sure that she was into some kind of New Age thing at one time by the look of some of the items.

Not that she knew for sure, Claudia could only guess. She shooed Danny's hand away when he started thumbing through some of charms that were sitting in a cherry wood box.

"I don't know if they are her interests now. She never does anything but work and watch TV with me at night. These boxes have been untouched in her closet for as long as I can remember. This stuff looks nice, though. Would be a shame to throw it all away. I thought you and CJ might want it," Alexis blew the dust off of a miniature crystal ball.

Danny's eyes fell onto what he wanted for Lily. It was a carved, jade flower attached to a golden chain, "For my silence, I want that for my girl."

"Fine, I don't want it," Alexis waved her hand for him to take it. He could hear that she was still annoyed from his attitude earlier.

"What do I get?" Julia piped up from the doorway with her eyes as big as the moon. She had a penchant for shiny stones and had become fascinated.

Alexis gave Claudia a look of annoyance. They hadn't thought about Julia telling on them. Claudia knew just what to do and took the silver butterfly clip. It had a large green jewel in it. It was pretty enough to buy Julia's silence as well. Danny thought it was funny that Julia was already learning from him.

Claudia put it in Julia's hair, "You can't tell where you got this. Just say that Alexis gave it to you for your birthday."

"I can do that. It's so pretty. I don't want mom to take it away," Julia grinned and then ran off to see how it looked in a mirror.

"Come on, lets take this stuff and go meet CJ," Claudia picked the box up carefully from the table. She decided that she wanted the cape herself already. CJ probably would want something from it.

From there, Danny lost interest in the girls. He had gotten what he wanted from them and so he was done.