

DEZARAY STORM

BAM! A blow right to the back of my head knocks me onto the floor. Drake is home, back from his Saturday night drinking binge with the boys. My eyes are watering. I hear him curse, but as usual it's hard to understand him through the slurs. The stench of Stella combined with puke is so overwhelming my throat stings. Before I have time to catch my breath, Drake delivers another punch; this time to my left cheek. *Blimey!* My eye feels tight. The socket is suddenly too small and it seems my eye is about to explode out of it. I clench my fists and grit my teeth, telling myself not to fight back. I deserve this. His suffering is mine and I am the reason for it. He strikes me again. A ringing sounds in my ear and my head throbs.

I deserve this, I tell myself, though part of me screams to get up. To dive for the knife, I keep hidden under my pillow, but I won't. The weapon I swiped from the kitchen so long ago, is nothing more than a comfort, I will never use.

Drake searches for an object with which to strike me but tonight I have hidden every possible item. He glances at my stool and my heart lurches – surely, he wouldn't. He attempts to lift it but is too sluggish. At last, his arms are tired. For a few moments, he garbles and attempts to feebly kick my spine. I swallow the blood collecting in my mouth and remain perfectly still as, through squinted eyes, I watch him stumble and stagger from my room and into his own. He is gone for the night.

Not long after, I hear the front door slam and the thud of feet racing up the stairs, two at a time, in a panic to find out what Drake has done to me this time. I know it is Nathaniel.

'Oh, Dezaray.' Rushing in, Nathaniel kneels down and checks that no bones are broken before carrying me out of the room. My body cries in protest, but I attempt a smile that turns into more of a grimace. The adrenaline has worn off and the staircase appears to be getting narrower as Nathaniel ambles his way down, with me in his arms. I have the unpleasant sensation of chunks rising in my throat and a cold sweat prickles my forehead, my palms clammy. I moan.

'Close your eyes,' Nathaniel orders. I do. At first the world seems to spiral uncontrollably but I am eventually glad I obeyed.

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I wake up on the couch in the living room, my injuries cleaned and covered. It's been a while since Nathaniel last did this and I screw up my face – a part of me had hoped Drake and I had moved on from his bursts of rage.

Shortly after, Nathaniel enters, pushing the pinewood door open with his hip. He holds a tray carrying a teapot, two cups and saucers and a plate of various biscuits. Setting the tray down on

the coffee table in front of me, he props a cushion behind my head and studies the bruise beneath my eye.

‘Hi,’ I smile weakly, ‘I didn’t think you’d come.’

‘Of course,’ he shrugs, ‘if I don’t get your “all good” text message then I’m coming over.’

The “all good” text message is a system Nathaniel and I put in place about a year ago. Every Saturday night, at ten o’clock, I am to text him to tell him I am okay—that Drake has ignored me as he usually does—however, if Nathaniel does not get that message, he is to rush over and rescue me...because we both know I am unlikely to rescue myself.

He pats my leg, ‘How do you feel?’

‘I’ve been better.’ I graciously accept the cup of tea he is offering and allow its heat to trickle down and warm my insides.

‘So,’ he purses his lips, ‘How many more times are you going to put up with this, Dezaray?’

I shrug, the movement sending a spasm of pain down my arm. ‘He’s my brother.’

Nathaniel scoffs. His jaw is taut and I know what is going through his mind. I remember a year ago, when Nathaniel had been tending to the garden and heard a commotion. Charging in, he had been shocked to find Drake laying into me, me on the floor in a blood-spattered slump. He had tackled Drake off me and the two had tumbled into a whirlwind of fists and feet. It ended when Drake had Nathaniel pinned, face down on the breakfast counter.

When Drake finally left us, I begged Nathaniel to stay out of it. It wasn’t worth him losing his job over, not to mention he was my only friend; I didn’t want to risk losing him too.

I watch Nathaniel remember and then he sighs. ‘If you won’t let me help you, Dezaray, then at least leave.’

‘Mum and Dad wouldn’t want that,’ I reason.

‘They wouldn’t want *this* either.’ Nathaniel snaps, ‘You can’t keep blaming yourself for their deaths, Dezaray.’

There is a pause.

‘Drake does.’

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‘You have the wrong girl!’ I scream, but no one listens. He is grabbing onto my hand and pulling me but I am sure I do not want to go. I have no idea where I am, how I got here or who is holding me. The man is good looking but I have never seen him before. His skin is pale and his eyes are a striking blue, made only more stunning by the blackness of his tousled hair. There are others with us but I cannot make out their faces. Everyone is in a rush; that I know, but I do not know why.

‘I am not supposed to be here,’ I insist.

‘Dezaray?’ The boy says, stopping in his tracks. He is beautiful. My heartbeat quickens.

My eyes shoot open, my pulse racing. I lick my parched lips as I anxiously scan my surroundings. I am in my bed, my pillow beneath my head, no longer in a world I have never seen with a man I have never known. I blink, his face still clearly etched in my mind. Sighing, I roll over and go back to sleep.

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‘It was so real,’ I tell Nathaniel the next morning as I pour myself a glass of fresh juice from the juicer on the patio table. ‘I can still see his face. Hear his voice. I was there.’

‘Where exactly?’ Nathaniel says, fumbling with the petunias.

‘I don’t know,’ I reluctantly admit. ‘It was weird, weird but really real!’ I know Nathaniel is not convinced. Like the time I told him of some cloaked people coming from a shimmer in the distance. He is sure I am merely concussed from last night.

‘Perhaps you had a wonderful dream and you would rather believe in that than face reality,’ he offers. I surrender, although deep down I am aware of how different last night’s dream was to any other I have had before. I eventually finish my piece of toast and leave for my carpentry class at Sanifud College.

The snow and gravel crunch beneath my feet as the wind stings my cheeks and chaps my lips. I pull my scarf tighter around my neck and readjust the hood of my fur-lined coat. Artificial fur of course, and not because I’m frightened of animal rights activists throwing blood or such like at me, but simply because the idea of having any dead parts of anything hanging from me, like cattle in a butcher’s freezer, is more than a little off-putting.

I shudder at the thought then quickly replace it with memories of the handsome stranger from my dream. Though I obviously didn’t want to go with him, there was something about him I craved. His voice offered me a comfort I have not known since mum died and it was almost as if his eyes could see straight to my soul. Despite the fact that it sounds completely mad, I have to admit that this man, whoever he was, made me...well...almost happy; a feeling I wasn’t even aware I was capable of experiencing anymore.

Then, an abnormal gust of wind knocks me to the ground, or at least that’s my story. It does not actually feel like the wind at all and I cannot escape the niggling feeling that I was in fact pushed over by something, or more specifically someone. I scan my surroundings but see no one; no one except a cluster of irritating girls from my class, leaning against a wall.

They are not impressed by my plain appearance: straight dark brown hair in a ponytail, unplucked eyebrows and absolutely no makeup. Nor can they understand my genuine interest in our class topics. Yet, for some mystifying reason, they do appear to enjoy having me around enough to let me know just how much they don’t.

‘Who exactly are you looking for?’ Annabelle Delovsky says derisively as her team of clones giggle beside her. I have half a mind to yell ‘For the person who knocked me over, you tramp’ but I don’t.

‘My guess?’ a male voice says. ‘She seeks the one who caused her to fall.’

I look up. It is that unusual lad from class, the one who speaks just as oddly as he lurks, and lurks just as eerily as he strolls. The laughter in response does not faze him as he saunters over and offers me his hand. His coat is much too large for him and the hood from his jumper, as always, hides his face. Though ordinarily I would refuse his hand, and anyone else’s for that matter, today, what he said has left me somewhat intrigued. I accept and allow him to pull me to my feet.

We make our way to the doors of Sanifud in silence.

‘If it offers any comfort, I believe you,’ he says at last.

‘I didn’t say anything.’

‘I often see and feel things I too cannot explain. I imagine you encountered a Spee’ad a moment ago.’

‘Why ever didn’t I jump to that conclusion?’ Though I feign sarcasm and disinterest I am itching for him to go on; perhaps explain what exactly a Spee’ad is.

‘You are right to say nothing. I’ve learned it’s best to keep those sorts of far-stretched truths to oneself.’

‘Well, thank you, but I never did say I saw or felt a thing.’

‘Aye. So, when you fell, whom did you seek if not one who none can see?’ He opens the door and walks through, allowing it to shut gently in my face.

I push it open and follow after him, unable to shake what he’s said from my mind. What is a ‘Spee’ad’? What exactly does he see or feel? Could it be the shimmer or the people in hooded cloaks? And what exactly did knock me over, as I am sure it was not the wind.

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‘Stunning!’ Professor Moxy beams at me. I am not even paying attention and somehow still receive praise. Perhaps that’s the real reason Annabelle doesn’t like me.

‘Thank you, sir.’ I smile and continue hammering the nails into the base of my rocking chair, trying to pay attention this time.

A scrunched-up ball of paper lands on my desk. I look around the class and can vaguely make out the eyes of Peculiar Lad from under his hood. He is staring right at me. I discretely unroll the note and read:

Look outside.

I do so and struggle to conceal my amazement. By Beatrice Brook, the lake in the distance, I see the shimmer. Only it is much more than a shimmer now. From here I can tell that it is in fact a

portal. Through it, I can no longer see the snow but instead am plainly staring into another dimension. The sun is shining there, not hidden behind clouds, and I can vaguely make out a muddled terrain and a line of trees.

Suddenly, the shimmer is gone. I glance at Peculiar Lad. He is no longer looking in my direction, but one thing is certain, he saw it too.