

Colin: A Serial Killer Romance
By JB Duvane

Cover by Kasmit Covers

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Colin: A Serial Killer Romance

Beauty is his obsession ...

Colin:

It started with the mannequin heads.
They were my escape, my solace, my companions in the darkness.
But the day came when they weren't enough. That's when I started taking
the girls.
But Avery? She's not like the others.
She's beautiful -- so beautiful -- but I can't hurt her.
I need to keep her with me ... *forever*.

Avery:

He should terrify me.
I'm his prisoner.
I've seen what he did to the others. How can I believe him when he says
he won't hurt me?
But there's more to him than darkness. There's a terrible sadness.
And strange as it sounds, a kind of beauty.
I wonder if I can ever make him see himself the way I do?

PLEASE NOTE: This is a dark romance with violent and unsettling themes of an adult nature that some may find disturbing. Colin: A Serial Killer Romance is a standalone novel of 66k words with a HEA.

Chapter 1

Colin

These lips ... oh God, they're perfect ... the beautiful tapered curves and lines ... so ... perfect ... so ... mesmerizing ...

"So, I asked him what he thought and he just wouldn't tell me. I tell you that man makes me crazy"

They're all different ... all unique ... but these lips ... these ones are absolutely perfect ... there's no comparison. The sharp edges ... and the color...

"Well, what do you think, Colin? I trust your opinion."

"I think you always look fabulous, Mrs. Fields," I said as absentmindedly I continued to stare at the woman's lips.

So small and delicate ... but screaming to be noticed ... how can such beautiful lips even exist ...

"If I ever heard my husband say that to me I'd fall over dead."

"Please hold still, Mrs. Fields, I'm almost done."

I want them ... these perfect lips ... if only I could ...

"Ouch!"

I was barely aware that a woman was sitting in front of me until she flinched.

"Sorry about that, Mrs. Fields. I'll try to give you a bit more warning next time."

My gaze left the perfect lips as my eyes moved down the length of her body and I slowly snapped back into reality.

Pink wool suit with big white buttons ... stocking covered legs and feet ... am I at home? Is this someone I brought to my home? I thought to myself in a state of confusion.

My eyes moved up to the wall that I was facing, but I only looked at myself in the lightbulb framed mirror for a second before quickly looking back down at the woman in the reclined beauticians chair in front of me.

No, I'm not at home

"Oh, don't worry about that, sweetie. If you warned me about every hair you had to pluck out of my face I'd be in this chair all day. Not that I would

mind," she said as she looked up at me, her head upside down and tilted back towards me. "I absolutely adore coming to see you at the salon. You always make me feel like a queen."

I was now officially back from wherever I had disappeared to ... wherever it was that I went when I become lost in my ... hobby, I guess you'd call it.

"Very few things give me more pleasure than what I do here, Mrs. Fields. And you are a queen, don't ever forget that."

"Oh, Colin!" she said as she blushed a little. A very becoming reaction for a woman her age.

"You're are such a handsome young man, Colin. You must have a girlfriend."

I ignored her question and elevated the back of the chair so that she was sitting upright and her feet were back down on the ground.

"Let me get you back to the hair washing sink, then we'll talk about how you want me to set your hair today. I'm hoping you'll let me try something new to emphasize that heart shaped face of yours."

"Oh, Colin, you really are a naughty boy. You've never told me a single thing about yourself, and here I am yapping away about my life for hours on end."

"What can I say? I love listening to you, Mrs. Fields. Now let's get you over to that sink."

As she stood up and transferred herself over to a wheeled chair that I used while I was washing hair I heard a voice from the doorway behind me.

"Colin, you've got a walk-in."

I turned to the door and saw Jade, the salon receptionist, standing in the doorway with a young, beautiful girl. Jade turned and disappeared around the corner, leaving the girl standing there looking around like a lost puppy. She also looked incredibly nervous and I smiled as I watched her shift from one foot to the other.

"Hey there, what can I help you with?" I said, my focus zeroing in on the girl's eyes, but more specifically, her eyelashes.

They're perfect.

I looked away quickly as I continued to push Mrs. Fields through the doorway into the back room, but I knew exactly what was going to happen.

Later ... tonight ...

"Come on back, I've got another appointment this afternoon, but I can squeeze you in," I said as I looked back and winked at her, relishing the red glow that spread across her face.

"Well ... um ... my friend sent me here. She said you could do my hair and that I should tell you that Marcy sent me. She said ... well she said it wouldn't cost a whole lot?"

There it was, that uptick at the end of the sentence. That was one of the things I looked for in the girls I took home. It wasn't the only thing I kept an eye out for, but it was definitely something I had picked up on over the years. A pattern of speech that screamed insecure and easily abducted. She might as well have been raising her hand and saying "Take me!"

I smiled to myself at the thought of having someone to take back to my house today. I didn't think today was going to be the day, but then again I never do. It always just happens out of the blue, like a gift from the universe, and I always just roll with it. But it had been so long since I'd had a girl come in and tell me that Marcy sent her that I was starting to think that that ship had finally sailed.

It doesn't have to happen, you know. I don't have to do it.

"Sure, no problem. You can wait back here until I've got her under the dryer and we'll see what we can do for you," I said as I gave her another little smile and wink.

"What's your name?"

"Leah," she said with a more relaxed expression. She was finally starting to loosen up some and even gave me a little bit of a smile.

That's right, I thought as I turned the faucet on and ran the shower of warm water through Mrs. Fields hair. It was all part of the whole game for me. The first few steps thrilled me just about as much as the finale. Getting a girl from nervous to relaxed to giggling with just a smile and a few well crafted sentences made me feel like I was flying. Hell, even just getting the girls to come in to see me, I still couldn't get over how easy it was. Even after all these years they still flocked to me like flies to honey. It was an incredibly powerful feeling to see the effect I had on her, especially since I knew just how nervous she really should be.

"I think I just need a trim. Nothing fancy," I heard her say behind me as she slipped into the beautician's chair.

"Ok, Leah, just wait here and I'll be back in a few minutes," I said as I wrapped a towel around Mrs. Field's head and looked back at the girl who was now somehow dwarfed by the beauticians chair.

Do you see how young she looks? Maybe she's a runaway ... even better....

"Maybe we can even give you a new style, no extra charge," another lie punctuated by another sexy smile. No wink this time though. I didn't want to overdo it.

As I wheeled Mrs. Fields into the front room my field of vision was almost completely obscured by the girl's eyelashes. That's exactly what I needed. Those eyelashes.

I don't have to do this. I know I don't have to.

Mrs. Fields got up and sat down in the stylist's chair and I unwrapped her head slowly, removing the damp towel a little at a time as I scrunched it around the woman's wet hair, completely unable to get the image of those lashes out of my head.

Yes, you don't have to ... but, those eyelashes. Didn't you see those incredibly long eyelashes? And the way they curled up so perfectly?

I could feel them behind me, the lashes that surrounded those beautiful eyes. They were just waiting for me, through the doorway and just inside and to the right. If I took a couple steps back and turned my head just a little bit I would see them, but I forced myself to look down at Mrs. Fields, at her eyelids and her eyelashes. Nothing special there. Mrs. Fields had fabulous lips but her eyes were wrinkled and bloodshot. I wasn't looking for that. I was looking for perfection.

Besides, I would never take one of these older women home with me. It's not that they weren't beautiful. Some of them were gorgeous; still holding onto the stunning features that they believed had carried them throughout their lives. But they all had husbands and families that would notice right away if they went missing.

They made appointments and paid with checks and credit cards that could be traced, and there was no way I was going to risk that. But these girls, the young ones that came in without appointments, the walk-ins that told me

"Marcy sent me," they paid in cash. There was no evidence whatsoever that they had ever even set foot in here and this salon was always so busy that no one would remember a young girl that didn't have an appointment.

I closed my eyes and focused on the hypnotic rhythm of the towel scrunching around Mrs. Fields wet hair and when I opened them up again I hoped against hope that my mind would be changed about the eyelashes on the girl in the chair, but it was too late. I already knew exactly what was going to happen to her.

Now I just needed a plan. I had two more appointments that afternoon and it was Saturday so the salon was extremely busy. No one usually bothered me down in my basement studio, except Jade when she was bringing me a walk-in, but since today was so crazy I couldn't count on anything. I knew once I got Mrs. Fields under the hairdryer I would have time to at least get Leah into the hair washing sink and, if I was lucky, maybe even out the back door. I just had to hope that my three o'clock wouldn't show up early.

I quickly combed out Mrs. Fields hair and pulled out the curlers and setting lotion. I had just laid everything out on the counter when I felt a presence behind me and closed my eyes.

"You are just going to hate me, Colin, but I'm a half hour early for my appointment."

It wasn't my imagination. The voice came from behind me and I didn't even have to turn around to know that my next appointment was standing in the doorway.

Bitch, you are not going to ruin my plans.

"My husband dropped me off on the way to a golf game, and you know how horrible he can be when he wants to play. I can wait out front if you're too jammed up back here, dear."

I took a deep breath and waited a few seconds for the blood to return to my head before I put on my sexiest smile and turned to the stylish, fifty-year-old woman in the doorway.

"That's probably a good idea, Mrs. Anderson. I'm sure you'd be more comfortable in one of the chairs up front and I'll come and get you the minute I have Mrs. Fields under the hairdryer. Ask Jade for a cup of coffee while

you're waiting," I said to her with that god-awful fake smile still plastered to my face.

"Of course, Colin. I'll get out of your hair," she said with a little wave as she sashayed around the corner.

If I was going to do this, I had to do it soon. I couldn't waste any more time.

I rolled Mrs. Fields hair up as quickly as possible while responding to her inane chatter with as mundane of words and phrases as possible just in case she was paying attention to my responses. I was usually able to keep the attentive stylists facade up very believably, but I was distracted. I couldn't stop thinking about those eyelashes.

I went over and over the steps in my head, my thoughts racing and looping and my heart pounding, even though I'd done this exact routine dozens of times.

Hot towel, anesthesia, laundry bag, unlock back door, put body through door, make sure door is locked again ... everything as quickly as possible ... make sure no one is around ... no one sees.

Over and over and over the words played in my head, almost to the rhythm of the rolling and pinning of the curlers.

I didn't understand how this had all come together so perfectly, but maybe some part of me knew it would all along. Was that even possible? Was it possible that maybe even when I got up this morning that I somehow knew that a girl was going to come in and ask for a ten dollar haircut because her friend Marcy had sent her to me. Or rather, her friend that had told her to tell me Marcy sent her.

Marcy sent me

Marcy was long gone now, but somehow she was still working her ass off for me, sending me these young, poor girls who just needed a cheap haircut or some make-up for an audition. They probably weren't all aspiring actors, but putting those ads in the trade papers like I did when I started out was genius. It helped build up my clientele over the years, but it also still ensured a steady stream of young, hapless but gorgeous girls who were trying to enhance their natural beauty for a good price. They slipped in and slipped out, virtually unnoticed and I happily squeezed them in, in between my

higher paying clients.

Those old ads had somehow become word of mouth among young actresses and college students, and maybe even prostitutes as I sometimes suspected, that were just starting out. Somehow word of a cheap haircut at a high end salon traveled quickly, and to places I had never expected.

Of course, I didn't use all of the girls that came my way through that system. In the beginning there were just too many, but over time the walk in traffic had slowed considerably. But honestly, I didn't always find something I needed off of every single girl that walked into my studio. Besides, taking girls to my home and preparing their parts for use wasn't something I always had the time or inclination for.

I wasn't some unrelenting serial killer, carving my way through piles of bodies with a big smile on my face and a giant hard-on for dead girls. I just wanted everything to be perfect. My house, my life, myself...everything. And sometimes my hobby was the only way I knew how to get there.

Finally, the last curler was pinned into place on Mrs. Field's head and I moved her over to one of the dryers, then lowered the giant dome over her head. She wouldn't be able to see or hear a thing with it on, so I left her there and headed to the back room. On my way back there I wished I'd already heated up the towel. I knew that was going to be another couple of minutes and I was in a hurry.

"Thanks for waiting, Leah. Let me get you under the sink and we then can get started. You can tell me the style you were thinking of while I'm washing your hair."

"Thanks so much for squeezing me in. I really appreciate it. My friend who told me to come here, her name isn't really Marcy, it's Jennifer, but that's what she told me ..."

"You don't have to explain, I know. Word of mouth is what got me where I am today, and I'm more than happy to help anyone who's just starting out themselves," I said with a smile as I pushed her chair backwards and stared at those beautiful lashes. I smiled down at the girl, but unbeknownst to her, it wasn't for any reason she could possibly fathom.

I quickly went to town on her hair, getting it wet and leaving her head hanging back over the edge of the sink as I put a wet towel in the microwave.

I set it for forty seconds, then went over to the cabinet and pulled out a large, white laundry bag. I was starting to relax because everything was going smoothly and I could tell that it was all going to work out just fine.

I took the warm, wet towel from the microwave and quickly carried it back to the girl.

"Warm towel for your face. Just relax," I said with a smile as I placed it over her mouth and nose. I reached under the sink and pulled out a bottle that I had marked with DANGER - ACID, so that anyone rifling around down there would leave it alone, then poured it over the towel. The minute I applied pressure to the towel the girl started squirming and bucking underneath my weight, but went limp in under a minute.

I quickly put her body, with the towel still over her mouth, in the bag, unlocked a door in the back of the room that led to the dark, abandoned tunnel just outside, closed the door, and locked it. The anesthesia I had poured on the towel would keep her out for at least two hours, and that was more than enough time to get Mrs. Fields and Mrs. Anderson the hell out of there, walk home, come back through the tunnel, pick up the girl in the laundry bag, and carry her back home.

Just as I walked back into the front room of my studio the dryer shut off and Mrs. Fields looked up from her magazine.

"Now just what do you do the whole time I'm under this infernal thing, Colin. You must be bored out of your mind."

"Not in the slightest," I said with a smile as I sat her back down in the stylist's chair and started to remove the curlers.

Chapter 2

Avery

"You're really lucky, this is the only room left. Usually everything's already taken this close to the beginning of the semester. So, it's seven-hundred a month, including utilities, and you share the bathroom down the hall with three other people on this floor. You've got an awesome balcony that looks out on the street and extends across the house; you share it with the person in the room next door. Any questions?"

"No, this looks really fab. I really like these old buildings. The wood trim around the windows and doors is amazing, and the window seat," I said as I walked over to the big bay window, "I love it."

I sat down on the bench seat in the window and looked around the room.

"The green walls are fabulous, too."

"Yeah, the paint job came with the last tenant. The landlord wasn't too happy about it, but he's too cheap to paint over it so I guess it's good that you dig the colors," she said with a smile. Barbara was the apartment manager and looked like she might have been a few years older than me. Not a lot older, but definitely out of college.

"I do," I said as I got up and walked over to the double French doors and looked out onto the street below.

"Yeah, most of the buildings in this neighborhood are old Victorians like this one. A few were demolished because they were left to deteriorate past the point of being fixed up but this one is still in decent shape. In fact, most of the houses on this street have been taken really good care of. It's like the Victorian street of dreams. People tour through here all the time just to see them from the outside, but thank God this isn't one of the houses that has walking tours. That would drive me nuts."

I was already starting to like Barbara. She wasn't overly cutesy like some of girls my age, and she seemed like she would be a cool person to hang out with. I hoped that maybe she would become my first friend in this town because I had never been very good at making new friends.

"I'm pretty sure that house next door over there has been in the same

family for like a hundred years. So, did you just move here?"

"Yeah, I'm starting at the University next week."

"Where from?"

"Well, I grew up on the coast in a pretty small town but I used to come into the city every once in a while with my family, so I know my way around ... kinda," I said with a sheepish smile.

"Cool. Well, let me know if you have any questions. I can tell you where to get all the cheapest food around here. Dollar slices of pizza and things like that, so you're not just eating ramen for every meal. So, now that you officially live here and I know where to find you I have a huge favor to ask."

"Sure, what is it?"

"Well, I got called into work this afternoon, in fact, I gotta leave in about a half hour. And I have a dog, Joey, that needs to go out later. See, he's still kind of a puppy and I'm worried that ..."

"Sure! Of course, don't worry about a thing. I love dogs."

"Oh, fabulous! Ok, well if you don't mind coming down in a half hour I'll hand him over to you then. And you can drop off your first and last at the same time," she said with a smile as she walked out the door. "And thanks again...uh...Ok, I feel like a total asshole, but I forgot your name. Sorry, it's nothing personal. I forget everyone's name the second they tell me."

"Avery Davenport. And sure, it's no problem at all. I'll see you in a bit," I said as I closed the door behind her.

This new life thing is already going really well, I thought as I turned around and leaned against the door. I just stood there for a few minutes and looked at my new-to-me room. It was so exciting to finally be on my own and all alone in my very first apartment.

I set my bag down on the bed and walked over to the doors that led out to the balcony. When I stepped out into the cool afternoon air, I cringed as I felt ice cold drops of rain hit my skin.

Lucky I got my stuff moved in when I did

I went back inside to get out of the rain and shivered as I shut the door behind me. I noticed an old metal radiator that stood against the wall behind the closed door and I walked over to it and turned the knob on the top. A far away clunking sound started, then got louder and louder until it filled the

room. I worried for a minute or two that the whole thing was going to explode, but as soon as the clunking stopped a soft hiss came out and the space right next to the radiator started to warm up.

I walked back across the room to the bay window that looked out at the house next door. It looked exactly the same as the one I was standing in and I wondered if it was also divided up into dorm-style apartments. From where I was standing I could see an old sign above the front door that hung out over the sidewalk and read McNab's Market but the windows on the ground floor looked completely blacked out.

I made a mental note to check out the store when I took Barbara's dog for a walk, then started to turn and head back to unpacking my boxes but just before I did my eyes moved up to the window on the floor directly across from me. I froze when I saw a man standing there looking right at me.

He startled me and I think I startled him because all of the sudden he disappeared. I guess he was as curious about his new neighbor as I was but he must have let some heavy drapes fall in front of him because the window was completely black now.

I turned and headed over to the pile of boxes against one of the walls and start opening them up. I was glad this room was furnished because I barely owned anything. My mom had bought me a microwave for my room before I left and I had a few dishes and some silverware but the rest was just clothing and music. I was going to have to get another set of sheets and more towels at some point, and some curtains would probably be a good idea, but I had time to figure out how I was going to decorate.

After I got all my clothes into the closet I stepped backwards to close the door and I looked across the room towards the window that I had been at earlier. I was all the way on the other side of the room but I could have sworn that just as I glanced over, the neighbor had been looking in my window again before immediately disappearing.

Oh my God, was it that same guy? What a creep, I thought as I walked back over to the window. I wondered if I stood there long enough if he'd show up again but I had to get down to Barbara's apartment before she left for work. I threw the rest of my jeans and t-shirts into a set of built-in drawers then grabbed the empty boxes and took them out the door with me.

Barbara told me that the recycling was in the basement, so I figured I'd run down there really quick and get rid of the boxes, then meet her back in the hallway at her apartment. I opened the door that said BASEMENT and switched on the light from the top of the stairs. I could barely make out the stairs on the way down and when I got to the bottom I could only see what looked like piles of junk.

After my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I realized that some of the piles were recycling and some were furniture that still looked like junk ... and that the basement was just as creepy from down there as it had been from the top of the stairs. Even with the overhead bulb on it was still incredibly dark, damp and musty. Plus, it smelled really weird. Like a pile of old, moldy books.

There were two washers and two dryers down there, and I even though it seemed convenient to have them in my building, I immediately decided that I wanted to spend as little time down there as was humanly possible.

I walked over to the corner of the room that had a pile of cardboard and noticed a dark corridor that hadn't been visible from the stairs. It was a sort of hallway that was lined with chain link fence cages on either side and at the very end stood an old metal door that was locked with a huge old, rusty padlock, and I wondered what was behind it. For a moment I thought it was probably more storage, but then I realized that, from what I could tell, the door must have opened up to the back of the building. But this level was underground so I didn't understand where it could lead to. I jumped when I heard a scratching noise that sounded like it was coming from somewhere along the corridor, so I dropped my boxes in the corner with the other recycling and ran up the stairs.

When I got to the top of the stairs I slammed the basement door shut just as Barbara was coming out of her apartment.

"Pretty damn creepy down there, isn't it?" she laughed as she turned and locked her apartment door.

"Yeah, man. I don't know if I ever want to go down there again. I heard a weird scratching noise by that door that's all the way in the back."

"Oh yeah, that door goes out to the tunnels. I'm sure there's tons of rats running around down there. I wouldn't go in those tunnels for a million

bucks," she said with a shiver.

"Tunnels?"

"Yea, I've never been through that door or gone in them myself, but I have friends who've been crazy enough to. You'll have to come over some night soon and I'll tell you all about them."

"Sure that sounds great!" I knew I was geeking out a little too hard on becoming friends with Barbara, but I also thought that whole tunnel thing sounded really interesting.

Barbara walked over to me and handed me her dog's leash and held a key up in front of me.

"Ok, I want you to know that I wouldn't do this for just anyone, but you seem like a really nice person and I have a good feeling about you. Here's the key to my place. I just need you to take Joey out for about fifteen minutes and let him do his business, oh and here's a bag for that," she said as she handed me a wadded up bag along with a leash with a furry, medium-sized mutt attached to it.

"Then, if you don't mind, give him some food when you bring him back in. It's on the counter in the kitchen, you can't miss it. You can give him the whole can. He's been a good dog today," she said as she scratched Joey's head. "But, you're always a good dog, aren't you?"

"Of course I don't mind. Oh and here's the check."

"Ok, thanks a million, seriously. I've gotta run. I probably won't be back till late so I'll talk to you tomorrow, ok?"

"Yeah totally! And, don't worry about a thing. I love dogs, and this guy looks like a real sweetie. We're gonna have fun, aren't we, Joey? Joey-Jo-Jo," I said as I bent down and ruffled the fur on his head with both hands.

I watched Barbara walk out the front door and disappear down the stairs, then stood up and headed out as well.

"You ready to go for a walk, buddy? Let's go!"

The rain had let up by then so when Joey and I walked through the doorway and out into the cool night air all I felt was a slight mist cover my cheeks. We walked down the stairs to the sidewalk and turned to the left. I figured this was a good way to explore the neighborhood and get my bearings so I decided to take Joey in a big circle around quite a few of the surrounding

city blocks.

This was a very old part of town and, like Barbara had said, the majority of the blocks were still lined with old Victorian and early nineteenth century era houses. There were some houses that looked like they were split up into living quarters on top and business below, like the one next door, but a lot of them looked totally original.

It was starting to get dark by the time I made my way back around to my block, coming from the other direction past the house next door with the market sign out front. I was disappointed to see that the convenience store on the ground floor didn't have any lights on at all and didn't look like it was open. In fact, it didn't look like it had been open for a long time. There were pieces of cardboard in the windows and I couldn't see inside at all.

I turned to head back to my building but was stopped in my tracks when I smacked right into something. I thought maybe I had walked into a tree or a pole, but then let out a small yelp as I felt two hands grab my arms. But then I gasped as my eyes moved up a tall body with very broad shoulders and I found myself looking up at the most intense eyes I had ever seen in my life.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry! I wasn't looking where I was going at all," I said as I stood there completely dumbfounded by this tall man who was practically holding me up in the air by my arms. He released his grip for a moment, but then grabbed my arms again to prevent me from falling backwards. I looked down to see why I couldn't move my legs and realized that Joey had somehow wrapped his leash around both of us multiple times.

We were held together in this position, our bodies completely pressed up against each other, as I tried to unwind Joey's leash. But no matter how hard I tried to get him to go back in the other direction, Joey kept pulling the leash tighter around the two of us. I could feel every muscle in the man's legs and chest flex and press against me as he held me upright and I wavered around trying to regain my balance.

"No, no! Joey, stop it! I'm so sorry! He's not my dog," I tried to explain as I yanked on the leash with one hand and on the poor stranger's leather jacket with the other. After what seemed like ten full minutes of a very embarrassing struggle, I finally got the leash unwound and stepped away from the man in front of me. He wasn't as old as I had first thought. He looked like he might

be about ten years older than me and had a dark red shirt on underneath his black leather jacket. I couldn't help but think that they both complimented his dark hair and eyes very well.

"That's ok, no harm done," he said with a funny look on his face. It was the kind of look you see people give you when they think they might know you from somewhere. Like his brain was trying to place where he had seen me before, but I knew we had never met. I would definitely have remembered him.

I suddenly felt very shy and tongue tied. I didn't have the vaguest idea what to say to this gorgeous guy, and I was starting to feel really awkward because he wasn't saying anything either, but he also wasn't leaving. He was just standing there staring at me intently with the darkest, most beautiful eyes I'd ever seen in my life. He wasn't even smiling at me; he was just staring.

"Hi, I'm Avery. I live right over here," I said as I gestured to house next door, then cringed immediately. I was pretty sure he didn't care where I lived, but I had no idea what else to say.

"Do you know if this store is ever open? I thought it would be nice to have one next door. I just moved here for school from the coast so I don't know the area very well."

Oh God, shut up, Avery! He doesn't need to hear your life story.

I bit my lip to try to get myself to chill the fuck out. I was rambling about a stupid store to this hot guy who clearly had no interest in anything I was saying.

But why is he staring like that?

"No, it's closed permanently," he said as his focus narrowed in on my lips. I didn't know if I was imagining it but it almost seemed like he was moving towards me a little bit while his eyes moved slowly back and forth between my lips and my eyes. Almost as if he were leaning in for a kiss. I was so mesmerized by the slow movements of his dark eyes and by the sharp edges of his jawline and lips, that I jumped about a foot in the air when Joey suddenly barked at me.

The man straightened up and cleared his throat then looked down at his hands. When he looked back up at me a few seconds later the hypnotic stare that had drawn me in was gone.

"Goodnight."

His voice was deep and soft and it sent a sensation down my spine that I hadn't ever felt in my life. Like his voice was connected to the space between my legs by an invisible thread that pulled at me with each syllable that came out of his mouth. I wanted so badly for him to say something else but he didn't. But he didn't leave either; he just stood there and looked at me like he was waiting for me to leave.

"Sorry again," I said as I held Joey's leash tight and walked backwards toward my house, then turned and ran up the stairs and into the door of my building. I immediately shut the door and leaned up against it, trying to catch my breath.

"Oh, Jesus Christ Avery! You're such a dweeb."

I looked out the window in the top half of the door, but the guy in the leather jacket was gone.

"He couldn't get away from us fast enough, could he Joey-Jo-Jo," I said with a sigh as I walked the dog down the hall and took him into Barbara's apartment.

When I got back up to my place I flopped down on the bed and looked around the drab room, deciding that I really needed to go out and get some things to spruce it up a bit. It really was kind of sad and lonely in there, and even though I had a tendency to sit alone in a dark room, I had decided when I left home that I was going to turn over a new leaf in my new apartment and my new city. I promised myself I would try and surround myself with things that made me happy.

I suddenly felt a vibration coming from my back pocket and I fished out my phone. It was a text from my mom asking how I was settling in and it made me smile. I was glad that she was finally getting the hang of texting and after I responded to it I got up and walked over to the window and looked down at some people walking by the convenience store sign on the house next door. But then when I looked back up at the window directly across from me I saw that guy again. Only this time I recognized the shirt he was wearing. It was the same dark red button up shirt that the guy on the street had on.

Why didn't he tell me that he was my neighbor, I thought as I continued to stare at the dark window. And why does he keep looking over here?

I thought about how earlier, before I had run into him on the street, I had called him a creep. But now that I'd had that moment with him, with our bodies pressed up against each other, he was so much more interesting.

I guess he's not a creep anymore. He's my hot neighbor who looks in my window, I thought as I laughed at how ridiculous that sounded. But the thing was, it was true.

Chapter 3

Colin

I heard a voice coming from somewhere but didn't register what it was saying. I was still lost in the colors and swirls and depth of the eyes I had spent the last half hour applying makeup to.

The flecks of color and light ... these eyes ... they're so beautiful

My head was spinning with the minuscule flecks of color that whirled around in front of me ... but then suddenly became her eyes. Avery's eyes. I hadn't been able to stop thinking about her eyes since that night.

"Hey, Colin, you got room for another one?"

From the minute I first saw her through the window I could see her eyes and lips as clear as if she were right in front of me and I knew ... I could tell that she was perfect. And then when we ran into each other on the street and I saw her up close, I couldn't believe what was happening. The streetlights reflected off her eyes and I became lost in them ... lost in the moment ... and it was if I was looking deep inside her, down a long, dark tunnel that pulled me in and whirled me around and around until

"Yo! Col! You in there?" the receptionist said as she snapped in the air.

Col? What the fuck?

"This chick says Marcy sent her. You gonna take her, or what? I gotta get back to the phones."

"Yeah, yeah. Sorry, Jade. I was thinking about something else." I rubbed my eyes and opened them just in time to watch Jade turn and run for the phones, then I looked at the girl she had brought in with her and froze.

Oh God.

I had to turn around to conceal the fact that my hands had started shaking. I was suddenly feeling like everything was closing in on me and I only had one option.

Look at her

The girl in the doorway, she looked almost exactly like Avery. How was that possible?

I don't want to do another one today. I don't want to do it.

Her eyes were almost the exact same color and her lips had the same fullness in the middle and sharp lines out to the corners.

Yes, you do

My hands were trembling as I put the finishing touches on the woman in the chair. Why was I having such a hard time controlling everything all of the sudden? What had Avery done to me?

"Hey there, what's your name?" I said with my back turned to the girl.

"I'm Josey. My friend said to tell you that ..."

"Just have a seat in that back room there, Josey, and we can talk about all that in a second."

"Ok, thanks!" she said as she disappeared around the corner into the back room. I was relieved that she was gone. I couldn't think while she was in the room with me. I wasn't going to take her home, I had decided. I didn't need her. I had collected all the parts I needed just the other day. I really didn't have to do it.

But she looks so much like Avery. Don't you find that a little odd?

"You're all set Mrs. Anderson. Makeup and hair that will make all the other women at the gallery opening seethe with jealousy tonight," I said as I poked a few curls with the pointy end of my comb while I smiled at her in the mirror.

You could even pretend she's Avery

"Oh, Colin you are a genius! Every time I come in you give me a different look, and every time I absolutely adore it."

I was looking at Mrs. Anderson in the mirror and smiling and nodding but all I was thinking about was the girl in the back room. And Avery.

You have a laundry bag ... and the anesthesia is right there under the sink. It would be so easy

"I'm so glad you like it, Mrs. Anderson. You look perfect, as always."

"Oh, Colin, if only I were twenty years younger," she said with a wink.

"Well, I'll let you get to your next customer. This is for you," she said as she stood and turned towards me.

"I hope you realize just how much I appreciate what you do for me," she said as she folded up a bill and put it in my hand.

"I think I do, Mrs. Anderson. The feeling is more than mutual," I said with

a big smile. She always tipped well, in fact, most of my clients did, but it wasn't the money I was referring to that I appreciated so much, it was the access it gave me. Where else could I work where I could touch women's faces and hair and hands and feet like this without raising suspicion. Not to mention the walk-ins.

But I could see her perspective. Most of the women who came to see me were still very attractive and were willing to spend an unlimited amount of money to retain their looks. It was usually the younger girls who weren't able to afford much.

Like the girl in the back room, I thought as I watched Mrs. Anderson walk out the door, then turn and give me a little wave.

I took a deep breath, then walked through the doorway into the back room and found the young girl sitting on one of the stylist's chairs. Unfortunately she was still having the same affect on me and I pretended to wash my hands in the hair washing sink so I had an excuse to turn my back on her.

Those eyes. Turn around and look at those eyes

"So, what can I do for you, Josey?" I asked as I gave my hands an epic washing.

"Well, a friend of mine told me that if I came here and told you that Marcy had sent me, you would do my hair and make-up for real cheap. See, I have an audition tonight and I just want to look my best. I want to be an actress," she said with a smile that I could hear even with my back turned.

But I just did one a week ago for chrissake! If I do too many of these walk-ins I'm going to get caught!

"Sure, I do that all the time. I usually charge ten bucks. Is that too much?"

"No, that's perfect! I can totally do that. I just need a trim and you can style it however you think it would look best and then just natural make-up. And if you have suggestions on how you think I should do my make up that would be really cool too."

Ok, now you have to turn around. Just do it. What are you so afraid of?

"Of course," I said as I turned and looked at the girl in the chair and I immediately knew what was going to happen. Suddenly, I clicked over into some kind of super-human beautician persona with my mouth pouring out a

bunch of bullshit on autopilot as I planned out the rest of my afternoon with the same circular thoughts that ground the steps into my head over and over.

"I can see right now that you'll want to want to keep your eyeliner a teeny bit below your eyes to make them appear as big as possible"

One more appointment scheduled this afternoon ... plenty of time

"... and stay away from any orangey colors"

... get her in hair washing sink first ... then the hot towel ... then the anesthesia from under the sink

"... because of your skin tone"

... then get the laundry bag ... put body and towel in bag ...

"... but there's lots I can do and I'll be sure and show you as I'm doing it."

... unlock door and throw bag into tunnel ... piece of cake

"Are you ready to get started?" I said with the biggest, fakest smile I think I'd ever had plastered on my face in my life.

I lowered the dryer down on my last appointment for the day and stepped out into the hallway that connected to the other studios. I just wanted to see how many people were left in the salon this close to closing. I really didn't want to be held up tonight. After this last woman was out from under the dryer I was going to leave the salon right behind her.

"I doubt it. He never goes out with us for drinks after work. I don't think he wants to associate with us."

"What do you mean? Does he think he's hot shit or something? Doesn't he have a massive following of women that worship him?"

"Yeah, but who cares. It's just a bunch of rich bored housewives. Nobody special. I would be willing to bet that they pay him to fuck them in that back room cause their husband's are all after younger girls."

"I think he's gay."

"Well, I think he's just weird."

Jesus Christ they're talking about me again. Of course they are. Fucking bitches. Don't they have anything better to do with their time?

"Maybe he has a family and would rather spend time with them?"

"I doubt it. He's too weird to have a family."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll understand after you've worked here a while."

"Jade, you're the only one who says that about him. I don't get it. He seems really sweet to me."

Jade. I knew she talked about me behind my back.

"I just don't like him, that's all."

"I think you're just jealous."

"Jealous of what? Believe me, I'm not interested."

"Sure, Jade. He's just about the hottest guy in this entire city."

The laughter of multiple girls rose in the next studio over and I rounded the corner back into mine where the dryer was still going full blast. I was glad it was so noisy because I didn't want to hear anything else those bitches had to say. It's not like I didn't know that they talked about me, but hearing it just made my blood boil, and now I really wished it was Jade in that bag in the tunnel. I went into the back room and rinsed my face in the sink. I was sweating and shaking again and I just wanted to get out of this damned place.

She's not even worth it. There's nothing even remotely redeeming about her and it would be a waste of time to even try and find any part of her to use. Just forget about Jade. What you have already is so much better.

I caught my breath as I waited for the hair dryer to stop, then I was out of there.

Chapter 4

Avery

"Hey lady, how's it going? Come on in," Barbara said as she stepped back so I could walk through the door into her apartment.

"There you are Joey-Jo-Jo, you little cutie," I said as I crouched down and scratched the sides of his furry little face. He jumped up and put his paws on my knees and I squealed when he started licking my face.

"Hey! Get down! Bad boy, Joey!" she said as she pushed him back down to the ground.

"Oh, that's ok. We've gotten really familiar with each other over this last week. I think he may be my new best friend."

I walked over to the couch and Joey jumped up right next to me and snuggled up to my leg when I sat down.

"Thank so much for taking care of him for me, Avery. Seriously, you saved my life. I had no idea what I was going to do with him in the evenings when I got this new job. It looks like they're going to need my help for at least another month, so do you think you can keep walking him?" she asked as she crossed the room to a kitchenette area. Her apartment was the only one in the building that had a small kitchen in one corner of the room with an oven, sink and full size refrigerator.

"Sure, no problem! I love taking Joey out at night. I forgot to tell you, I ran into the neighbor the other night when we were out for a walk."

"You're ok with pizza right?"

"Of course! I'll eat it with pretty much anything on it."

"Cool, cause I've got one with everything in the oven right now. What neighbor? You mean someone on your floor?"

Barbara walked over to the oven and pulled out a pizza and the room filled with the scent of salty meats and pizza sauce. She sliced it up then brought it and some napkins over to the coffee table in front of the couch.

"Oh, wait! Drinks! What do you want? I have beer and coke and water."

"Coke's fine. With ice, please," I said as I grabbed a slice and brought it to my mouth with the assistance of a napkin. "No, the neighbor who lives in the

house next door, on the right with the McNab's Market sign out front. That totally hot guy with dark hair and insanely intense eyes. Joey and I totally spazzed out and made fools of ourselves in front of him. Didn't we Joey?" I said as I looked down into his begging eyes. "Awww, here you go." He just about jumped in the air as I held a mushroom out for him, then settled back down next to me, keeping his eyes glued to my pizza. "Do you know what his name is?"

"I don't know, McNab, maybe?"

"I mean his first name!"

"Yeah, I don't know that guy at all. He totally keeps to himself. I've never even see him coming or going. What did he say?"

"Nothing really. He seems kind of interesting though. I've seen him through his window a few times."

"What do you mean you've seen him through his window? What's he doing?"

"Nothing, really. Just looking out."

"At what, his driveway? There's nothing out there to look at except this house. Don't tell me he's looking in your window."

"Well, how would I know what he's looking at? I've just seen him a few times and then he disappears pretty quickly after that."

"Wow, he sounds weird to me. I'd stay away from him if I were you."

"You sound like my mother," I said as I laughed. I didn't want to tell Barbara that I was actually really into that guy so I played it off like it was nothing and changed the subject.

"I met a guy at school though. We're supposed to hang out tonight. He's gonna text me later so we can meet up for a drink or something," I said as I shoved more pizza into my mouth.

"That's awesome. Is he hot?"

"Yeah, he's really cute and he seems pretty nice. We always sit next to each other and talk every day in class. Actually, that reminds me, remember the day I moved in you told me about some tunnels under the buildings and that this building has an entrance through that weird metal door in the basement?"

"Yeah," she said with a mouthful of pizza. "I've never been down in the

tunnels, but I've heard a lot about them. Why?"

"Well, in one of my classes, the required one about local history, someone asked a question about the tunnels and the professor said she didn't know much about them and that she wasn't even sure if the tunnels were still open or if maybe they'd caved in over the years. The professor said it's even possible that the whole story about the tunnels is just a rumor, and then I remembered what you said about them and the door in the basement. So it's all real?"

"Oh, they're real, alright. All you have to do is unlock that door and you'll see. I've always been too scared to go down there myself, but I have friends who have and swear up and down that the stories are real."

"What stories? What happened down there?"

"There's a lot of stories, like, hundreds. Apparently, at the end of the eighteenth century this town was a big port town for ships that brought all kinds of stuff to the west coast from all over the world. I guess a lot of these old Victorian houses were owned by wealthy people who stored food and coal and other stuff in their basements. And some of them were businesses like hot guy's house with the grocery store next door, but I think most of them were just houses with servants and the tunnels were built to make it easier for the servants to bring supplies back to the houses and businesses."

"It was easier to move stuff back and forth down there? That's crazy."

"Well, I don't think all of the streets went all the way down to the docks, so maybe that was the only way they could get some of the stuff delivered. They started down at the docks and went on for miles through this old part of town. A lot of the docks and tunnel entrances are totally blocked off now because the sections of the tunnels that came out at the end of each street had collapsed and almost the entire area between the buildings that were above the tunnels and the water started to sink. In fact, some parts over there are just cesspools now with patches of quicksand and the buildings on the last block have mostly been abandoned."

"Quicksand? Here in the middle of the city?"

"Yeah, it's all blocked off now though. They built concrete walls along the sides of the buildings so that people wouldn't climb around on the crumbling docks and fall into the nasty, murky water, but people still get over the walls

and get in the buildings and hang out down there, God knows why. People also still hang out in the tunnels. Most of the entrances are locked or bricked over, but they find a way to get in, because I've heard that homeless people sometimes sleep down there to get out of the rain. But, as far as I'm concerned they'd have to be pretty damned desperate to sleep in those tunnels, with so many people disappearing in this area over the years."

"People disappeared in the tunnels?"

"Tons. Well, that's where people assume they disappeared to. The rumor is that in this part of town, over the last one hundred and fifty years or so, a whole lot of people have disappeared. And I guess why most people say that it's an urban legend is because a lot of them were prostitutes or homeless that nobody really missed so there's no way to prove that they disappeared. And, really, I guess there's no way for me to prove any of it since I've heard about all of it second or third or fourth hand, like an urban legend, but I personally think it's real."

"But don't people always think urban legends are real?"

"Yeah I guess, but I grew up here and I have friends whose families lived in this neighborhood for decades and they believe it. Some of them even know people who disappeared."

"But I thought you said that it was prostitutes and homeless people that disappeared."

"Well, a lot of them were, especially in the first half of the last century. But in the 70s and 80s a lot of young girls that were going to college here disappeared. And some of them lived in this very apartment building."

"Really?"

"Yeah, and there are friends of mine who's parents lived in this neighborhood when they were kids and they said that there were curfews almost every summer. And there was always a new story in the news about a college girl that had disappeared. I also have a friend who totally became obsessed with the tunnels after a childhood friend of his disappeared from this very street. He's researched them and gone down in them a whole bunch and he told me, from what he read, that the disappearances slowed down in the 90s, but every once in a while there's a story in the news about a young girl that's missing."

"And none of the cases have been solved?"

"Well, I guess nowadays they figure they're runaways or something and runaway cases aren't very high priority. A lot of the bodies haven't been found, so there's nowhere to start looking."

"Why all young girls?"

"Well, isn't it always young girls?"

"Yeah, it seems like it. Doesn't creep you out to live here?"

"Sometimes, but as long as I don't go down in the basement by myself I'm fine. I usually do my laundry around the corner anyway because I can just throw everything in my car and take it over there. But I don't really even like having the key to that door. And I told the landlord that I wouldn't deal with the recycling if he put it down there so he comes once a month to take care of it."

"You have a key to that door?" I said as I sat up straight. The idea of going down there by myself totally freaked me out, but checking out those tunnels with Barbara sounded awesome.

"Don't look at me that way, Avery. There is no way I'm going in those tunnels. And there's no way I'm even unlocking the big freaky lock on that door."

"Seriously? You're not even remotely curious about what's behind that door? You've never even been in there. Not once."

"No way! There is no way you're getting me down there."

"I wasn't trying to get you to do anything, I just thought it might be fun if we went together. It would be like an adventure."

"An adventure? You've got to be kidding me. It would be scary as hell."

"Well yeah, I mean, it does sound a little creepy, but it also sounds really cool. Plus, the main project in that class I have is to write a paper on some historical part of the city and I think the tunnels would be freaking amazing to do it on. I could research it and see if there's any more information online but having first-hand knowledge and pictures of what it's like down there would be so cool. And we'd be together. You and me. Best buds. On an adventure in the tunnels."

I could see by the look on her face that she might budge if I brought out some bribe ammo. The more I talked about it the more excited I got and I

really just wanted to go down there and check it out and she was the only person I knew who could take me down there.

"Ok, I will walk Joey every night for the rest of the year if you will take me down there."

Barbara still didn't say anything but started to shake her head like she was about to say no so before she could I continued.

"And I'll take you out to dinner! Wherever you want to go. And drinks afterward. And anything else you want, it will be your night!"

"Ok! Ok!" Barbara said as she flopped her head against the back of her chair. "I'll do it! I'll go down there with you!"

"Honestly, I can't understand how you could not want to go down there. It's sounds so interesting and mysterious and the tunnels have such an amazing history."

"Yeah, an amazingly freaky history. I just don't like dark places like that is all. I don't even like watching horror movies. But, ok, if you really want to go down there we can do it this weekend. During the day and with a whole bunch of flashlights and I'm taking my pepper spray."

"But what difference will it make whether it's day or night if it's underground? I mean, it's gonna be dark down there no matter what."

"Dude. The bad things that happen, they happen at night. You know, the witching hour and all that."

"Yeah, but if we're together we'll be ok. Let's just go down there open the door and look."

"Now? You want to go down there right now?" she asked with her eyes as big as saucers.

"I just want to see what it looks like. I seriously don't think I'll be able to sleep or stop thinking about it."

"Ugh! Ok. But just for, like, less than a minute. Less than thirty seconds would be preferable. I mean, anything could happen."

"Don't worry, I'll be there to protect you," I said with a smile as I got up from the couch.

"Ok, let me grab my keys. I think they're in here," she said as she opened an old antique side table that stood next to the front door.

"And I'm carrying my mag light. I'm pretty sure I have another flashlight

in here for you too," she said as she rifled through the same drawer that she got the keys out of.

"Here it is," she said she handed me a small flashlight.

We both put on our jackets and went out into the hall and then through the basement door, which was never locked. I reached my hand up and turned the light switch on and we both just stood on the top landing for about a minute.

"Go ahead," said Barbara as she nudged me forward. "This is your freaking adventure."

It was just like the other time I'd been down there. The dim light bulb hanging from the ceiling barely cast any light around the room, let alone all the way up the staircase. We both started down the stairs slowly but then I felt a push from behind me and I screamed.

"I think something just grabbed my foot!" Barbara squealed as she squeezed my shoulders, pushing me down the last few stairs.

I turned around and reached down and picked up a section of hose that was popping out through one of the spaces in between the steps then turned back and held it up to her.

"Ugh. Ok, I'm being a weenie," she said as she feigned a laugh. "I can't help it though. This basement really creeps me out. Let's just get this over with."

"It's not really so bad with both of us here, right?"

"Sure, whatever you say."

The metal door stood there at the end of the creepy chain link fence lined corridor. On either side, behind the fence, were small sectioned off spaces that were separated by more chain link fence, and each section had a door that was padlocked with a rusty old lock like the one on the metal door. The sections looked like storage spaces but the furniture and boxes that were inside all looked like they had been there for at least twenty years. I couldn't imagine that any of the college students that were living in this house we're storing any of this stuff.

"What is all this junk?"

"Oh, it's just old storage. It's been here since before I moved in and that was six years ago. I guess maybe old tenants that moved?"

"But why would they leave their stuff?"

"I don't know. Are we doing this or what?"

"Yeah, yeah. Go ahead and unlock the padlock."

Barbara tried to put the key in the hole but it wouldn't slide all the way in. She tried to push it in and out a few times to loosen it up but she couldn't get the key to turn.

"I think we need to come back with WD 40," she said as she turned and looked at me.

"Here let me try." I took the key and wrapped my hand around the cold metal of the padlock then inserted it into the slot.

"Ok, but don't break the key. I'm pretty sure it's the only copy."

I wiggled the key back-and-forth a little bit and finally felt the lock start to turn. It was slow going, but I finally got the key to turn all the way to the right and I felt a click. I pulled down on the lock then turned and looked at Barbara and her eyes were as big as saucers.

"Are you ready?"

"No, but whatever. Let's do this."

I turn back around and slipped the curved bar out of the holes that held the lock in place, then grabbed the old metal handle on the door and gave it a tug. There was a popping sound and some dust puffed out around the door frame and as I continued to pull a long low sound came from the hinges. As I opened the door further the sound turned into a high-pitched squeal that set my nerves on edge. The sound echoed throughout the basement and down the tunnel, which added an incredibly creepy depth and made it sound like there were three or four different sounds being emitted at the same time.

The first thing I smelled when the door cracked open was an incredibly musty, dank smell, kind of like the basement, but way stronger. My hands were shaking as I reached into my pocket to grab the flashlight so I could see something, anything. There wasn't a sliver of light coming from anywhere except for the dim bulb in the basement and that was almost non-existent at the end of this corridor. I pulled the door all the way open and as it gave out its final moan the entire space in front of me lit up. I turned to my left and Barbara was standing next to me with a flashlight that was the size of a loaf of French bread with the most powerful light emitting from it I had ever seen.

"LEDs. They're the shit," she said as she squeezed my arm.

"I'm really glad you brought that monstrosity," I said as we slowly started moving forward through the doorway.

"See? See? I told you! It's real. It's a freaking tunnel!"

"Holy shit, it is."

I moved to the right out the doorway and tried to look around but the stream of light from my little flashlight didn't go very far.

"Oh my God, Barbara, your flashlight is insane," I said as I turned in the other direction. Barbara's flashlight lit at least a couple hundred feet of the tunnel, showing wooden arches and metal doors and piles of junk for an incredibly long distance.

"Will you hold that thing still? I can't see anything with you waving it around like that."

"Ok, Ok. I'm just trying to make sure that no one is sneaking up on us."

She still had her arm linked with mine and was grabbing it with the opposite hand so I put my little flashlight back in my pocket and we both held onto the big flashlight with both of our hands and moved it together. I steered us both to the right side of the basement door because I had seen a pile of boxes there that looked interesting. They were old wooden crates and that had been stacked up against the wall on the opposite side of the tunnel, and looked like they had probably contained food or produce at least fifty years ago.

"Let's go back that way," Barbara said, pulling me back in the other direction. "I saw a door down there. And keep the flashlight low so we can see if there are any rats running around in front of us. I know there are rats down here."

Barbara was moving very slowly so she could keep an eye out for rats and evil doers, so we were barely moving as we shuffled down the tunnel towards the other door.

"Hey, do you think that's the house next door? The one with the convenience store?"

"Yeah, maybe. Man, it's so creepy down here."

"I wonder if anyone ever uses this tunnel anymore, I mean for getting around. I really want to walk around some more."

"You're crazy," Barbara said as she kicked a can to make sure it wasn't moving.

Suddenly Barbara jumped and grabbed on my arm even tighter, almost knocking me over.

"Holy fuck, what was that?"

It sounded like someone yelling or laughing but it also sounded incredibly creepy and distorted because of the tunnels and I was having a hard time not imagining a freaky clown with big, sharp teeth.

"I don't know. Do you really think people live down here or hang out down here?"

"I have no idea. I really don't want to know either. Let's get out of here," she said as she pulled me back towards the basement door. Then suddenly the sound of big heavy footsteps came from somewhere up ahead of us in the blackness. The crunching of gravel kept getting louder and louder as the footsteps got closer, but we couldn't see anyone coming at all.

"Dude let's go now!"

We both turned and ran back through the basement door and slammed it shut and I quickly put the padlock back on.

"Holy shit what was that? It sounded like someone was walking right toward us!" Barbara said, her voice shaking as she tried to catch her breath.

"But how could anyone have been walking toward us? We didn't see any other lights down there, and there's no way someone could walk around down there without a flashlight."

"Maybe it was an echo or something. Man, that place is just crazy. I'm going upstairs. You can stay down here if you want to," she said as she headed towards the stairs.

I jumped as my phone went off in my back pocket, then pulled it out and read *Gotta cancel tonight. Sorry.*

"Are you coming back to my place? We can watch TV or something," Barbara asked when we got to the top of the stairs and shut off the basement light.

"No, I'm tired. I'm gonna head home."

"Ok, catch you later," she said with a smile as she disappeared behind her apartment door.

I went up to my room and turned the light on briefly while I rifled around in a drawer until I found what I was looking for, a candle and a pin cushion. I lit the candle and set it on the windowsill then sat on the window seat and held the pin head in the candle flame.

Of course, Trevor bailed on you. What did you expect? He probably ran into someone much hotter and more interesting than you, I thought as I watched the pin head turn red in the flame, then pulled it out and pressed it to my skin and watched a tiny trail of smoke rise into the air.