

“If one is lucky, a solitary fantasy can transform one million realities.”

~ **Maya Angelou**

One Million Realities

A cool mist hung in the morning air, pressing down on the campus as if its vaporous arms could hold me back from entering the school walls. I sat in my black truck, watching students duck and squeal as they ran through the light rain that was just starting to fall. My phone buzzed on the seat next to me and I flinched, feeling a stab of guilt as Gabriel tried to get a hold of me again. I didn't like the way we'd left things, but I wasn't going to let him change my mind now and I sure wasn't going to change his. I certainly hadn't managed to get him to see things from my point of view in the past few weeks. This morning's conversation had been the worst yet. Gabriel wasn't my father, and he'd never claimed to be, but he was the closest thing I had to a role model or even an adult authority. It hurt more than I would have thought to fight with him. The echo of his accusations bounced around painfully in my head.

“You're making a mistake, Jaxon!” Gabriel had struggled to keep his volume down.

“We don't know that,” I'd snapped back.

“Exactly! We don't know *anything!*” He glared at me from across the kitchen, his hands clenching and unclenching as he considered how to restrain me.

My lips tightened into a thin line. “I've barely left this house in seventeen years. I want to go to school... for *real* this time. I'm tired of having no friends, of always studying in a 'confined environment,' of hating myself for things I have no control over.”

I saw the pain in Gabriel's eyes as he read between my words, understanding that the half-life he had given me just wasn't enough anymore. It wasn't his fault, and I hated him for making this all about himself.

“Look,” I swung my new backpack off the kitchen floor and grabbed the car keys off the counter. “This is for me this time. If things... get difficult, I won't go back tomorrow. I'll listen to you and I'll never ask for this kind of thing again. Just let me see if I can handle it.”

“Jax.” Gabriel was pleading now. “You're going to expose yourself. Everyone around you will be in danger. Don't do this.”

“You make me sound like a murderer.” I couldn't restrain the bitterness in my voice.

“You're not. Yet.”

“See you tonight.” I was cutting this conversation short before I could completely lose it. I slammed the door loudly on my way out, the doorframe shaking in a very satisfying way.

The worst part was I knew he was right. I was an idiot for even thinking of trying public school. It was the first day of the second semester and I hoped to blend in easily, using that fact as a cover, but that didn’t change the rashness of my actions. The car was oddly silent – I couldn’t risk listening to the radio and I hadn’t thought to bring a CD. The clock on the dashboard clicked another minute closer to the bell and I turned off the car with a sigh. I squared my shoulder, grabbed my bag, and headed toward the building.

The noise in the halls was almost deafening – I had been so used to silence – and only wound my nerves tighter as I tried to worm my way toward the main office. The noise level was much better as the office doors shut silently behind me. The receptionist seemed friendly, smiling as she handed me my class schedule. My eyes began to graze over the printed-paper but didn’t make it past the first hour – World History. I felt the blood drain from my face. It looked like I wasn’t even going to make it through an hour of my first day.

“Is everything okay?” The nice lady at the desk looked genuinely concerned.

“Yes, thanks.” I managed to choke out.

“Well, have a nice first day and let me know if you need anything,” she dimpled.

I nodded, unable to speak.

The hallways were even more crowded as I left the office, if possible, as more students arrived. I found the way to my locker, relieved that I didn’t have to ask anyone for directions. I shoved my damp coat and afternoon books into my small, empty metal piece of school property. A few girls were watching me from across the hall. They were probably wondering who the new guy was, but I was also pretty sure I had a strangled expression on my face too and I tried to act more natural. I turned to walk to class, running my hand through my dark hair to get rid of the misty residue, and caught one of the girls’ eyes.

She was tall, but not excessively so, and thin, but not in a bony, athletic way. She was in the back of the group, standing unobtrusively, yet something about her very presence demanded attention, though I could tell she didn’t seek it. Something about her face was sweet and kind, yet dignified and guarded. Naturally blonde, loose curls framed her slender and pretty nose, wide, full lips, and distractingly blue eyes. Her skin was brilliant; a complexion so transparent and clear that she seemed to glow. Every feature on her person was defined and distinct in a startling

way. I suppose my expression must have given away how she affected me because she turned a very becoming pink as she blushed and smiled curiously at me. Not having much experience with people, let alone girls, it was inevitable that I would botch the whole silent exchange by scowling and literally hurrying away from the giggling group of girls.

I waited until the last possible second to enter the World History classroom, feeling more and more every second that Gabriel had been right. I had no idea what I was going to face in there, but I knew from past experience it wouldn't be pleasant. Only three times had I ever experienced what Gabriel feared. The first time it happened, I was seven years old and Gabriel had been reading *Old Yeller* to me. My dog, Jack, was asleep at my feet. Suddenly, as if I had drifted off to sleep, I stood outside in the dark. The stars were very bright but there was no moon.

"You're going to have to do it, Travis," a voice said.

Travis? I blinked once in confusion. A sweet-faced woman was watching me, looking sad. I looked down at my hands where a heavy rifle sat. I could hear Jack snarling in a wooden pen next to me.

"I know," I responded automatically. I rested my head against the rifle, aiming yet unable to shoot. I couldn't remember why I had a problem with shooting him but I knew I must. With a quick movement I fired the gun. I was brought back to my bedroom suddenly, Gabriel leaning anxiously over me, the book we had been reading lying forgotten on the floor.

"Jaxon. Are you alright?" Gabriel's voice was urgent.

My eyes were wide - shocked and lost. Something warm was making my socks wet. I sat up slowly; Gabriel gave me space, and then Jack came into view. He still appeared to be sleeping, except for the bullet hole in his head and the blood pooling rapidly around my feet. I screamed.

"I didn't think this could..." Gabriel gasped, before rushing me out of the room.

When I had calmed down I told Gabriel all that had happened. When I pressed him on *what* exactly he didn't think could... he wouldn't answer. But I understood. He knew something about what had happened to me but never mentioned it again. I couldn't sleep in my own bed for nearly a year after that and I never forgave myself for shooting my own dog.

The other two occasions this had happened were less dramatic. The second time I was just watching a race on TV. One minute I was on the couch and the next I was in a racecar, completely ignorant as to the specifics on how they work. I lost control of the car and returned to

my couch with a broken leg, a head in need of stitches, and a lot of cuts and bruising. We threw the TV out that same day. The third time I was listening to the radio when I was taken from my room and found myself in a robbery chase. There weren't any casualties that time but it scared the heck out of me to be chased by the cops when I didn't know what I'd done. Radio was banned in the house from then on.

Something about my imagination was able to take stories and make them real – to a degree. No one but I knew that it was all some strange dream, yet my actions in these stories had very real consequences. Gabriel was furious that I would even consider exposing a classroom of innocent teenagers and teachers to whatever it was I could do.

I took a deep breath to steady myself before I walked through the classroom door. The bell rang just a moment later and someone rushed in behind me, nearly slamming into my back.

“Phew! Made it!” a breathless voice chimed. Someone grabbed my shoulder to steady themselves.

I turned around and came face to face with the pretty girl who'd smiled at me.

“Oh!” Her face light up in surprise. “I know you. You're new here.”

She held out her hand, still smiling, her cheeks flushed from racing the bell.

I smiled back tentatively and shook her hand. The gesture made me smirk a little; hand shaking seemed so elegant and formal compared to the typical high school stereotype.

“I'm Chanel,” she said.

“Jaxon.”

“Alright, people, let's take our seats,” the teacher called over the din of the classroom.

Chanel smiled and took a seat next to a guy who was eyeing me disapprovingly. I could tell even when he was sitting that he wasn't tall. His whole person didn't have a very commanding attitude and I immediately disliked him. As if to prove me wrong he took Chanel's hand and kissed her cheek, challenging. I felt my expression tighten. What did she want with a loser like him?

“Colin, none of that in here,” the teacher chided. Chanel blushed. That gave this teacher some bonus points in my book.

I took a seat near the back.

The teacher stepped up to the podium. “We have a new student joining us today.” He looked at me and smiled in a way that he probably felt was welcoming. “Jaxon Baxter, welcome to River View High School. My name is Mr. Torrez.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled.

“We were just about to start the French Revolution,” Mr. Torrez continued.

My breathing caught.

“Now the most common figures generally associated with the French Revolution are, of course, Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI. This war eventually led to their arrest and ultimate execution, however, there is so much more to this revolution, which we will explore in the next week.”

My first thought was *crap!* I didn’t even have time for a second one before the whole classroom blurred.

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Surprise was the first thing I felt when I blinked to find myself surrounded by colorful, sparkly, and very powdery people. I was in a church of some sort, with vaulted ceilings and mosaic walls. The pew I was standing in was crowded with clown-faced people, similar looks of awe and reverence on their faces. Mr. Torrez stood up by the altar, except he was dressed as an absurdly gaudy vicar-like person. He seemed solemn and proud standing there in front of the adoring crowd.

Someone was kneeling before Vicar-Torrez, with a flowing red velvet robe stretching from his shoulders down the aisle. As the vicar placed a heavy-looking gold crown on the man’s head, he stood and faced his adoring audience. I snorted, unable to decide how I felt about Colin playing the king, yet very pleased that King Louie was generally considered an idiot. I felt a little like a jealous actor, seeing the main role taken by someone completely incompetent.

Chanel was impossible to miss, standing with applause for her husband king. Her hair and dress were so extravagant that she could only be Marie Antoinette. I recognized others as well; nameless and new to me just moments ago in the classroom but here now as spectators.

I finally got my bearings, settling comfortably in to wait for this nightmarish fantasy to end. The church-like celebratory setting seemed innocent and safe enough, giving me no cause to

worry. I'd just bide my time until I could snap out of this. I thought about that dilemma then, never before having the chance to find a way out of these situations. It usually ended when something bad happened. And then my heart went cold.

The only thing bad I could remember from this particular story was the beheading of the royal couple now smiling before me. But that was *years* away at this point. Could I really be stuck in this false world for that long? Impossible... wasn't it?

I shivered at the thought but was certain then of the way this story was supposed to end. At that moment, as if she knew exactly what I was thinking, Chanel locked eyes with me. It reminded me of our moment in the hallway this morning. Though I was one in a crowd of hundreds she saw me and shivered daintily as well, her eyes tightening slightly. And I knew in that moment there was more than one way for this story to end – a million realities in this fallacious world. The question was, which ending would become real? And who would pay the cost?