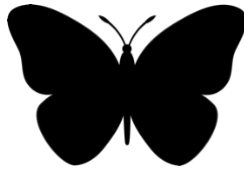


Lost Angels In Dark Skyes

By: Corrinne Mann

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I regret the day I was born.

I know I didn't have much say on the matter of why I came into this world, but if I could go back and do it all over again, I wouldn't. Not as myself, at least.

I wish I was born a butterfly instead. It seemed like their only real purpose in life was to be pretty and free. I envy their delicate yet powerful wings that carry them high into the skies and away from the dangers that lurk here on the ground.

Whenever I need an escape, I close my eyes and pretend the darkness is my cocoon. I eagerly take on the metamorphosis, aching to be better and different than who I am now.

Light peeks through; freedom is close as the cocoon splits and sheds around me. My beautifully crafted wings are ready and I stretch them wide anxious for flight. The sun beams down, lighting my path toward the heavens and I fly.

I finally feel free until a loud car horn blares and startles me into a brief panic. I flap my wings frantically, trying to find my way back to freedom, but I lose all hope and fall from the sky, crashing hard into the doomed reality that awaits me.

THE BEGINNING OF MY STORY

“The light’s green, ya knucklehead! Move!” Sabrina yelled, her heavy Jersey accent adding spice to her usually dainty voice. My sweet social worker morphed into a vicious road rage beast once the unusually long red light that held us hostage on this congested street finally flicked green.

The rusty red pickup truck in front of us had no chance against Sabrina’s fury as she mashed down on the car horn. I sat in the backseat of her gold Mazda hooptie, melting from the high-noon summer sun that beamed down on us with no mercy. I’m sure lack of air conditioning in the poorly maintained car fueled Sabrina’s rage, which seemed to cool down once traffic started moving and a slight breeze relieved us both of the torturous heat.

“Skye?” she called from the driver’s seat. I ignored her as I was too busy trying to adjust the dingy tan seatbelt that kept digging into my sweaty neck and irritating me more than I already was. I tried yanking it away from my body but of course it snapped back with a vengeance, locking me in like a prisoner with no escape.

“Skye?” Sabrina called again while adjusting the rearview mirror to look at me. “You’ve been quiet this whole ride. Are you okay?”

No I’m not okay! I screamed at the top of my lungs, but the words just echoed inside my head. I allowed my attitude to answer instead by rolling my eyes and looking out the window silently.

As a freshly orphaned fifteen-year-old headed to live with strangers, no, I was not okay. Every juicy and gory detail of my tragic story was outlined in that brown file she carried around, so Sabrina *knew* I wasn’t okay.

“Skye, I know things have been—” Sabrina paused as she struggled to find the right word, but there was none.

There was no right word that could describe how things had been for me, but she tried again anyway.

“I know things have been ... difficult ... since that night, but I don’t want you to blame yourself for what happened. It’s not your ...”

The rest of Sabrina’s words landed on deaf ears as we slowed to a stop at another red light.

A black butterfly fluttered outside my window and I sat up for a closer look as she landed on the passenger side mirror and stretched her mighty wings. I watched with envy, wishing she and I could trade places so I could fly away from here and away from *that night* Sabrina wouldn’t shut up about—the night I killed my parents.

I don’t remember much of what happened. When I try to piece it together, mostly-blurred flashes of blood and bones, broken glass, and body bags came to mind before I get lost down a black hole.

“It wasn’t your fault,” I heard Sabrina say. But she was wrong.

It *was* my fault. Everything was my fault, and I killed them.

The black butterfly flew away as soon as the light turned green, abandoning me with my haunted reflection in the side view mirror. I hated what stared back at me.

Blood stained my cheeks as it dripped from my eyes. The longer I stared, the more blood oozed drenching my face in red. I couldn’t look away, even though I wanted to.

“Skye!” Sabrina screamed in horror just as the mirror exploded into a million pieces.

THE HOME

“We’re close!” Sabrina’s accent jolted me back to my senses.

I opened my eyes and looked around at the passing foreign neighborhood. Kids of all ages littered the block, basking in the summer sun with bike rides, hopscotch, water gun fights, and other games normal kids got to play with their friends. Their smiles were wide and bright, and I hated them all for the freedom they had and certainly took for granted. Lucky bastards.

“I think you’re going to adjust well here, Skye. Queenie takes good care of her girls.”

We pulled up to a teal-colored two-story home with a perfectly manicured lawn and a garden that sprouted roses of all colors. Three girls who looked about my age played double dutch in the driveway, blocking the car’s path.

“Car!” one of them yelled out, and they swiftly moved out of the way so Sabrina could pull in and park. I lowered my head to avoid their nosey stares as they peeked in the windows.

“We’re here!” Sabrina sang, her fake excitement reeking more than her perfume. “Are you ready?” she asked, grabbing my file labeled “S. A. Dove” and climbing out of the car without waiting for me to tell her I was not.

I was never going to be ready.

Tears boiled in my eyes, and I wished hard to fly away, but that wish shot to hell when Sabrina snatched my car door open.

“Come on, Skye. You’re going to be just fine here.”

I heard the patience abandon Sabrina’s tone as she spoke through a tight smile. I knew she was sick of me and couldn’t wait to dump me off so she could move on to the next lost

cause. Frustrated and without any other choice, I grabbed my book bag and reluctantly got out of the car just as those three girls walked over.

“Hi, Miss Sabrina!” they sang in unison, sounding and looking like a bootleg version of TLC.

The queen bee, Bianca, led the trio with her shapely figure, peanut-butter-brown skin, and waist-length box braids. Her light-brown eyes felt like fire as they looked me up and down.

“Looks like we’re getting a new doll in our doll house,” she smirked, as the Hershey-colored identical twins, Jadeite and Jasper, giggled behind her. The pair were rail thin with two kinky afro puffs on top of their heads.

“Girls, this is Skye.” Sabrina reached out to rest her hand on my shoulder, but I jerked away fast. I caught the confused looks on the trio’s faces briefly before I hung my head. No matter how much I thought I was used to the weird and unsure stares, I still needed to hide from them.

“Is she okay?” Bianca asked, in an all too familiar tone of *what the fuck?*

“She’s just a little nervous,” Sabrina lied. I knew she wanted to say something else, but wouldn’t dare. Not in my presence, at least. “I’m sure she’ll warm up once she gets settled. Come on, Skye.”

I kept my head low and followed Sabrina toward the house. I stopped while she climbed the few stairs to a big porch decorated with big pots of white roses. I could hear the opening notes of the soap opera, *All My Children*, playing from inside through a dark screen door and I shuddered at the music. My mom and I used to watch that together every summer, but now that she’s dead ...

“Skye?” Sabrina called, and I looked up at her gesturing for me to come up the stairs, but I didn’t budge. I wasn’t ready.

Sabrina gestured one more time, and I ignored her to marvel at the rose garden on the side of the porch. It looked like the petals sparkled under the bright sun.

Defeated, Sabrina tapped on the screen door. “Hello, Ms. Queen? It’s Sabrina from social ser—”

“Damn it!” a syrupy voice roared and jolting my attention back to the door. I heard some shuffling around and footsteps before the door swung open and Ms. Doris Evangeline Queen stood before us in her gold lamé robe.

Famously known as Queenie, she was some big movie star back in the day or whatever. Her career died when she was blacklisted for some reason I didn’t know or care about. Now she lived off her riches and took care of lost kids in the system. Queenie’s skin was a smooth toffee-brown without any indication that she was sixty-five years old. We all would have been fooled if it wasn’t for her naturally white afro.

“So you got another tack head for me, huh?” A lit doobie hung from Queenie’s lips as she looked me up and down and exhaled a thick cloud of smoke, causing Sabrina to cough.

“Why, yes.” Sabrina managed to catch her breath. “Ms. Queen, I want you to meet Skye. Skye, this is Ms. Queen, but all of the girls call her Queenie.”

I nodded at Queenie and her eyebrow raised in that black woman I-know-you-didn’t arch.

“You don’t know how to speak, child?” Queenie asked me with her hand on her hip.

I kept my head low and didn’t answer as Sabrina quickly leaned in to Queenie to whisper in her ear. She wasn’t doing me any favors by whispering about my unfortunate situation. I was living it every day.

I rolled my eyes, wishing to just disappear from all of this, and that's when I saw her again.

"Skye," Sabrina called to me, but I ignored her, fixated on the black butterfly fluttering among the white roses. She found me.. Maybe she was here to save me—to take me away.

A gold trim along the butterfly's wings shimmered in the sunlight as she flew up high and away from me. I felt abandoned as her wings took her away to freedom. She flew over the house and disappeared from my sight just as I noticed somebody on the rooftop of the house.

I used my hand as a visor to help me see it was another one of Queenie's girls, sitting with her arms out as if she were flying. Her caramel skin soaked up every sun ray and her long, shiny hair glistened like tiny diamonds as she bobbed her head to the music playing in the headphones on her head. She looked down at me and waved, catching me totally off guard.

"Skye!" Sabrina called again and I quickly looked away from the roof and hung my head low.

"Lawd, give me the strength with this one here," Queenie pleaded to the heavens, eerily echoing memories of my father and his desperate cries for help. I felt her gaze glide over me again, contemplating this headache.

"Now, I got three rules for this house," Queenie started. "Don't touch my stuff, be respectful, and no boys, got it?"

I nodded.

"Good. Now get on in here and get acquainted!" Queenie stepped to the side and held the screen door open as I climbed the stairs and crossed the threshold to my new hell.

THE HAPPY FAMILY

Queenie and her trail of smoke guided me to my living quarters in her lavishly styled home. You could tell she was old Hollywood with her chic furniture and glam décor—a far cry from my old and mediocre home that was now deemed a crime scene.

Movie posters of all of her films decorated the walls alongside various pieces of art. There were no signs of a family like a husband or kids of her own. It was all about Queenie. She made sure that was known with the oil painting of her depicted as a queen mounted above a gold étagère filled with her many awards and recognitions. Queenie seemed to be so free just by loving herself. The love that poured out of her eyes as she marveled at her grand portrait was something I had never felt for my own reflection.

I followed Queenie up a long and steep staircase. The girl from the roof stood at the top of the stairs, watching me from over the railing with a smile that grew wider and wider the closer I got. I didn't know what her deal was, but I avoided eye contact and kept close behind Queenie as she led me to my new room.

It was a nice size, more private than my old room, and definitely pinker with its magenta walls and blush carpet. Pink rose decals were sprinkled along the walls and the white bunk bed and matching dresser that filled the room.

“The bottom bunk and bottom drawer is yours, and I expect you to keep your space tidy at all times. I'm not your mammy or your maid,” Queenie declared. She tapped the ashes from the doobie out of the open window before taking another puff.

I looked around the room, trying to take in my new surroundings. I paused when I caught my reflection in the full-length mirror that stood in the corner.

I could barely see my own face through the massive mane that sprouted unruly curls and shielded my dark-gray eyes from the world. Freckles stained my butterscotch-toned face, along with a few acne scars but you couldn't really tell which is which. I stared at myself for a moment before quickly looking away once the first drop of blood fell from my reflection.

That's when I noticed the girl from the roof in the room sitting on the square metal radiator under the open window. She stared at me, making me feel uncomfortable. She was really weird, and believe me, I know weird.

"Go on, get settled, and then get outside for some free sunshine," Queenie said as she walked toward the door. "I don't like a lot of noise in the house during my stories." Queenie disappeared from the room, leaving only her doobie smoke lingering behind.

"What she really means to say is, 'Get out so I can get blazed in peace!'" the girl joked. I ignored her as I dropped my book bag and plopped down on the bed.

The girl stood from the radiator and walked over, her opal-colored eyes piercing right through me.

"So I go by Angel, and I live up there." She nodded toward the top bunk above my head. "I just got here too, and let me tell you, it's a whole lot better than my old place." Angel exaggerated a sigh of relief and smiled. She was so pretty, with flawless skin and long, thick, straight hair. I could tell she had a relaxer—something my mom refused to use on me to help with my mane madness.

"Welcome, roomie." Angel held out her hand, waiting for me to shake it but I didn't. Instead, I looked away meekly and unzipped my book bag. Angel sucked her teeth before climbing the bed up to the top bunk.

“Whatever, then,” she scoffed as she settled over my head. Within moments, Aaliyah’s muffled voice sang through Angel’s headphones. She was lucky to have her Walkman. Mine was left behind at my old home, along with the rest of what I once knew as my life.

Waves of nausea began to attack me, so I kicked off my dingy white Converse and lay back on the bed. I wanted sleep, but I knew the nightmares would make it a hellish experience so I stared at the roses on the wall instead. Soon, my eyes felt heavy and I blinked long and hard. When I opened them back up, bootleg TLC stood over me.

“Come and play double dutch with us,” Bianca half asked, half demanded while smacking on a wad of bubble gum. She blew a big bubble that eventually popped on her nose.

“Do you even know how to jump?” Jasper asked with a stank face. That face was the only help I had with telling her and her sister apart. Even their clothes were identical.

“Well?” Bianca pressed.

I didn’t answer and looked past them at the roses.

“What’s her damage?” Jadeite asked with that infamous *what-the-fuck* face I often caused people to make with my ways, but I didn’t care.

I was prepared to alienate myself from them and Angel like I did with everybody else—a defense mechanism I had to develop to protect myself in this unloving world. My parents tried their best to protect me, but their best failed me, and that’s how I killed them.

“Are you deaf?” Bianca asked, annoyed.

“She must be a retard,” Jasper answered confidently.

I glared at her.

“Oh my gosh, Jas! You can’t just call them retards!” Jadeite almost sounded embarrassed as she shook her head. “That term is offensive. *Mentally challenged* is the polite way to address them.”

“Fuck that.” Bianca waved off Jadeite and kicked my mattress. “Hey, retard, want to go out and play?”

Jadeite and Jasper giggled while Bianca kicked the mattress a few more times, shaking me about.

“Answer me, retard!” She kicked really hard this time, but I still didn’t respond or react. I was immune to big bully bitches like her.

Frustrated, Bianca snatched my book bag and dumped everything on the floor. I sat up fast to rescue my things, but Jasper and Jadeite barricaded me in the bunk and I had no choice but to watch Bianca taunt all I had left.

“Is this your little diary?” Bianca teased, picking up my pink, tattered composition book that held my darkest thoughts and feelings disguised as colorful sketches and drawings.

I was mortified as she flipped through the swollen pages, her disgusted facial reactions critiquing what was never meant to be seen by the world’s eyes. She gagged before throwing my book to the floor and stepping on it with her pristine, white, Princess Reeboks.

“Garbage,” Bianca giggled, along with the twins as my heart cried. I was defenseless, and this pack of she-wolves would devour me if I tried to fight back. I was a one-woman army. Or so I thought.

“Leave her alone,” Angel demanded from over my head.

Bianca ignored her and continued to kick around my things. I could hear Angel let out an exaggerated, annoyed sigh.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” she warned. Her tone was calm, yet I felt the threat. The twins took a step back just as Angel swung her long legs over the side of her bunk.

“Leave her alone,” Angel repeated.

“I’m not scared of you.” Bianca smirked.

“You would be if you knew where I came from.” Angel jumped down from the top bunk and punched Bianca hard in her pretty face, catching the bully bitch all the way off guard.

Bianca stumbled for a second before falling to the floor and hitting the back of her head on the radiator. The twins and I cringed in shock at the sound of Bianca’s painful scream, while Angel stood over her with an eerie, wide grin.

“You gonna fight me or get out?” Angel asked with no mercy and her dukes up, ready to throw down.

“What the hell’s going on up there?” Queenie’s voice boomed from downstairs, but we all ignored her as we waited for Bully B’s next move.

Bianca sat up and groaned while touching the back of her head. Her body shook in horror when she pulled her hand back and blood covered her fingers.

“You’re bleeding from your head!” Jadeite blurted out the obvious.

“Now your brain is going to fall out!” Jasper chimed in frantically, forcing Bianca’s panic to erase all rational thoughts and send her into a frenzy as she struggled to stand.

“Queenie!” Bianca squealed and dashed out of the room. Angel laughed, infuriating Jasper.

“You bitch! You are so dead!” Jasper lunged at Angel, but Jadeite quickly grabbed Jasper’s arm and pulled her back.

“No, Jasper! She’s crazy!”

Angel smirked as Jadeite tugged the resistant and ready-to-fight Jasper out of the room. She may not have known or appreciated it then because emotions were high, but Jasper needed to understand that her sister saved her from a monster ready to rip her apart. I could see the hunger in Angel's dark eyes when she turned to me.

"You know, crazy is just a made-up word for misunderstood people.," Angel said with confident conviction. "That's what Mother would tell me to make me feel better, but I know she lied a lot."

I wasn't sure how to respond and was too scared not to, so I just nodded as if I agreed.

"You okay?" Angel asked, picking up my things and placing them back in my book bag. I nodded again. "You need to learn how to speak up for yourself if you want to survive in this world."

Angel picked up my book and tossed it in my lap before climbing back up to the top bunk. Again, within moments, Aaliyah's muffled voice serenaded the room.

I opened the book to the last used page that held my unfinished creation and traced my finger along the sketch. Bloody fingerprints stained the page and I tried my best to ignore them, but they were there as a permanent reminder of that night.

I tossed the book to the side and fell back onto the bed. The nausea tortured my insides, and I closed my eyes to welcome the nightmares ready to torture my mind.

THE HAPPY FAMILY

(Take Two)

So Bianca's brains didn't fall out. A couple of stitches to the noggin made sure of that. Queenie scolded Angel once she and Bianca returned from the emergency room and made Angel apologize to Bianca. Angel did, to my surprise, but I could see in her eyes that she would hurt Bianca again without a second thought ... just worse next time.

Dinner that night was super awkward. The five of us sat at Queenie's grand gold-and-black dining table with spaghetti piled high on our plates. Bianca sat at one end of the table with a red and swollen face from not only Angel's right hook but also her nonstop crying over the bald spot on the back of her head made for the stitches. She was devastated that some of her hair had to go, but it served her bully ass right for messing with me. I wanted to call her a bald-headed bitch, but I didn't. She already knew what she was.

I watched Bianca drown in her insecurities as she snarled at Angel with resentment. Angel sat next to me, unbothered and happily devouring her pasta. I could tell spaghetti was her favorite by the way she looked at me with a sauce-covered mouth and pointed to my untouched plate. The waves of nausea knocked out my appetite, so I nodded and slid my plate her way.

"Thanks!" Angel grinned in delight and stabbed her fork hard into the mountain of noodles.

"Freak!" Jasper blurted out.

"Shut up, Jasper!" Jadeite pleaded while nudging Jasper with her elbow.

The two of them sat across from me and Angel, picking at their food and obviously still disturbed by what happened earlier.

Angel didn't react or respond, and the trio watched her with fearful eyes. They tried to whisper among themselves about where Angel had come from, and I'm so glad they sucked at whispering because I wanted to know too.

"I heard her parents ..." Jadeite started but then lowered her voice with no success of sounding discreet, "I heard they were serial killers and dumped her off to go on this crazy spree, but the cops got to them." I looked at Angel and she didn't flinch. She was too distracted with getting as much powdered parmesan cheese as she could onto her pasta.

"That's not what happened," Jasper challenged.

"It is! I heard Queenie say it!" Jadeite defended, and Jasper shook her head.

"No. She said the mother was the killer and gutted the dad before offing herself," Jasper tried to quietly explain, but Angel heard her loud and clear. I was beginning to learn that Angel's calm demeanor was the first warning to not mess with her, but for some reason she couldn't pick up on that and kept testing the water.

"So it's not your fault you're a freak," Bianca smirked. "Your mom was a psycho!"

Angel stopped eating and cleaned her mouth with a napkin.

"You know, you're all wrong about what happened. I was there so I can tell you the *real story*." Angel paused. "I butchered them myself!" The trio looked at each other, unsure whether Angel was telling the truth.

"Oh, shut up! You did not," Bianca declared.

"Wanna bet?" Angel's grin grew wide. "I was so sick of them picking with me, so I took Daddy's steak knife and slaughtered them." Angel took her fork and pretended to slit her throat.

"It was pretty brutal—blood everywhere!"

I was convinced she was telling the truth while the trio stared at her, stunned. Angel giggled, tickled by their reactions.

“I’m just kidding, okay? Relax.”

Angel went back to eating just as Queenie entered the room with a pitcher of grape Kool-Aid and got situated in the seat at the other end of the table.

“Queenieeeeeee,” Bianca whined, looking at Angel. “She’s weirding us out. I don’t think she’s safe.” Angel rolled her eyes and stuffed more spaghetti in her mouth.

I envied the shield of strength Angel used to block out what attacked her. That type of armor is what I needed but was too weak to carry, and that’s why the world always won.

“I think we need to send her back or something,” Jasper added, and Angel swiftly gave her and Bianca two middle fingers.

“Hey, cut that out!” Queenie ordered, and Angel dropped her hands. “I’m going to send all of you back if you don’t shut up and eat, damn it!”

Bianca, Jasper, and Jadeite reluctantly did as they were told, keeping their eyes locked on Angel as she giggled to herself.

I was jealous of Angel. She was so free.

Unable to sleep later that night, I tossed and turned, straining the bunk bed’s joints with each movement I made. I was too hot and I couldn’t get comfortable, so I rolled over to get out of bed, but Angel startled me. Her long, thick strands dangled near my face as she hung her head upside down.

“You up?” she asked in a loud whisper. Her dark eyes stared right into mine, and I nodded.

Angel disappeared onto the top bunk briefly before jumping down to the floor. Her silhouette looked scary at first in the dark, but when she turned to me, the glow from the streetlight outside illuminated the top of her head like a halo.

“Wanna take a trip?”

I sat up and nodded again. At that point, I just knew Angel was going to save me.

“Come on.” Angel grabbed my hand and pulled me right out of bed. She led me downstairs, gesturing for me to be quiet as we tiptoed into the living room where Queenie lay asleep in her chaise in front of the TV. *I Love Lucy* was on, and I was briefly distracted by Lucy’s antics before I noticed Angel’s antics that weren’t scripted and would surely lead to real-life consequences.

Angel crept over to Queenie’s side with mischief plastered on her face and reached for the half-smoked doobie that rested in the ashtray.

“Jackpot!” she mouthed just as Queenie stirred.

Angel giggled and quickly covered her mouth to keep the giggles contained. It was like watching the movie *Mission Impossible* witnessing Angel pull off such a dangerous heist so flawlessly. She swiped the doobie and tiptoed back over to me before the two of us took off back upstairs.

THE TRIP

Angel and I climbed through the bedroom window to sit on the roof under the full moon and stars. The night air felt crisp and much cooler than the stale air that circulated in the house.

Angel lit the doobie and closed her eyes as she inhaled its essence. She held out her arms like wings after a long exhale and smiled.

“The first hit always sends me flying,” she declared, and we watched the smoke dance up toward the moon in the slight breeze.

Angel held the doobie out to me and I quickly shook my head. She shrugged and took another hit.

“Sometimes I get the feeling I don’t belong here,” she blurted. “You ever get that feeling?”

I nodded. Every moment I existed was a reminder of how much I knew I didn’t belong here.

“Tell me your story, Skye. How’d you get here?”

I didn’t answer. I stared up at the stars instead.

“That bad, huh?”

I nodded again.

“I get it,” Angel surrendered. “I don’t like talking about what happened to me either.” She tapped the ashes from the doobie quickly before taking another hit. Smoke oozed out of her nose and mouth as she looked off into the distance, in deep thought.

“I think we need some type of escape. This place doesn’t understand people like us.” Angel looked at me stone-faced. “We need to *go*.”

I met Angel's eyes, intrigued that she felt so much of what I was feeling. Maybe she wasn't as free as I thought she was. She sounded trapped just like me.

"Let's be like astronauts or something and just move to outer space." Angel giggled, nudging me with her elbow.

I smiled and looked back to the stars, swallowing the reality of that never happening, no matter how much I wished for it.

"Take flight with me," Angel commanded. She held the doobie out to me again, and again I shook my head. "Come on. Just a little," she fake-whined. "You look like you could use a good trip." Angel pressed the doobie to my lips and I jumped back fast, swiping it away from my face. She doubled over from giggling.

"Relax, Skye. It's not going to kill you."

Angel pulled hard on the doobie and blew the smoke right in my face. I closed my eyes and inhaled the contact—welcoming the stars that twinkled behind my eyelids.

"Nice, right?" Angel cooed and I opened my eyes to the doobie in my face. "Take this and ride it up to the moon," she demanded.

I hesitated before taking the doobie and putting it to my lips. Angel's smile stretched wide as she lit the end and nodded for me to take my first hit. I inhaled deep, maybe too deep, and immediately went into a coughing frenzy. Angel giggled while my eyes stung and lungs burned.

"Quiet, before you wake the neighbors," she teased. I tried to hand the doobie back, but she refused it.

"Don't wimp out now. Go on and hit that."

I did what she told me to and hit the doobie again, this time not as hard. Angel was

excited to watch the herb take over my being. I suddenly felt weightless as the ganja marinated my lungs and floated me up to the sky. Angel was right beside me as we secured our helmets and buckled up for takeoff. Our rocket of bliss blasted us into the stars toward the moon.

We were about to be free.

We were about to be free!

The moon was within fingertips' reach when the sky suddenly rumbled and shook the stars out of place. The moon turned black and warped into a deep hole before sucking us into a permanent state of misery. My body jerked forward, and I opened my eyes to a thick cloud of smoke blinding my view of Angel.

“Skye, get up!” I could barely hear her voice as my body jerked again. The smoke cleared, and Angel was back in the room, reaching through the window to pull me inside.

“Come on!”

My mind was in a haze and I felt sluggish, frustrating Angel. She squeezed my arm hard, tugged with all her might, and pulled me in through the window.

We fell to the floor just as Queenie's voice bellowed throughout the house. “Y'all done fucked up now!” Queenie's footsteps thumped loudly up the staircase as Angel and I scrambled to stand.

“Hide!” Angel squealed and climbed to the top bunk. She pulled a blanket over her head and pretended to be asleep while I stood in the middle of the floor, stuck.

I don't know why I couldn't move. Queenie's anger was getting closer.

“What are my damn rules? Didn't I say not to touch my stuff?”

The bedroom door swung open and I fell to the floor startled and distraught. I shielded myself with my arms to protect myself from Queenie's wrath as she stormed the room, but she stepped right over me and went straight to Angel.

"Wake your ass up!" Queenie roared and yanked the blanket off the bed, exposing Angel and that dangerous grin. "I know you got my shit, girl!" Queenie checked under Angel's pillows. She then moved down to my bunk and tossed it in a fiendish rage. "You know my nerves are bad and I need my medicine, so don't play with me, damn it!"

Angel struggled to contain her giggles, and I was too high to know what to do next. Bianca, Jadeite, and Jasper poured into the room with sleepy and confused faces as they watched Queenie's meltdown.

"What's going on?" Jadeite asked.

"If I don't find my medicine, I'm shipping all of y'all's black asses back to the state!" Queenie yelled, defeated and empty-handed.

"That's not fair!" Jasper whined. "We didn't take it!"

"I bet it was her!" Bianca chimed in and pointed. "Nothing ever went missing until she got here!"

Angel's giggles immediately came to a halt and she jumped down from the top bunk, ready to attack. Bianca tried to save face, but her scaredy-cat ass stepped back into the hall before Angel could snatch her up and do some more damage.

"You're right!" Queenie turned to Angel with fury in her eyes. "You've been trouble since the moment you stepped foot on my porch. It's time for your devious ass to get the hell up out of here! Pack ya shit! I'm calling Sabrina right now to come and get you!" Queenie flicked her robe behind her as she stormed out of the room.

My heart suddenly started to race when Angel followed Queenie out into the hallway. It pumped so hard that it echoed in my ears when I stood. I rushed out of the room just in time to see Angel shove Queenie—hard.

Queenie fell forward and tumbled down the long and steep staircase, landing at the bottom with a loud thud.

“Queenie!” Bianca screamed out as she and the twins rushed down to Queenie’s side.

Again, I couldn’t move, but this time I knew it was my denial of what had just happened that weighed me down. The chaos was all too familiar as it seemed to unfold in slow motion.

“Hurry and call an ambulance!” Bianca ordered. She and Jadeite tried to comfort Queenie, who writhed in pain while Jasper grabbed the cordless phone and frantically dialed 911.

I looked over at Angel, who was calm and actually amused at the turmoil she had caused. She casually walked down the stairs and stood over them, completely unapologetic.

“Oh my gosh! Is she dead?” Angel mocked with her hand on her chest as if in shock. I could see the fear in the others’ eyes as they stared at Angel, bracing for her next unpredictable move. It was the same look that haunted me every time my eyes met my own reflection.

Angel looked up at me and smiled that wide smile, making me feel uneasy. That’s when I realized I didn’t want to be like Angel anymore. I thought she portrayed what I craved to be—bold, brave, and free—but now, all I saw was a violent, unstable, and out-of-control monster that needed to be locked away.

“What’s the matter?” Angel asked, her smile turning into a frown. I couldn’t answer. I was frozen like a statue as she slowly made her way back up the stairs. “You think I’m crazy, don’t you?”

I lied and shook my head no.

“Look at her,” I heard Jadeite say in a low voice. “I always knew something was off about her.”

“We gotta call the police on her before she plots to take us out next,” Jasper followed behind. Angel ignored them and kept those dark eyes locked on me.

“Are you scared of me?” she asked sweetly, but I knew evil laced her tongue. Visibly terrified, I lied again and shook my head no.

“Good.” Angel’s smile returned. “I’m only here to protect you, Skye. I don’t know what I would do if I lost you.” Angel reached out her hand, but I refused it and ran back to the room. I was shocked to find Angel standing in the middle of the room.

Confused, I turned to run out, but Angel stood in the doorway, blocking my path.

“You have to trust me, Skye,” Angel said, moving toward me. For each step she took forward, I took one step back. “They’re going to get you, and when they do, it’s going to be too late.”

Angel got closer and closer, pushing me into the corner. My back collided with the full-length mirror, and Angel grabbed me by the arms.

“Listen to me!”

I struggled to break away, but Angel held onto me tightly.

“I said listen to me!” she shouted and turned me to face the mirror. I closed my eyes and refused to look at my reflection, but Angel shook me hard until I surrendered.

“Look, Skye! Look at the truth! You can’t hide from it anymore!”

Angel’s venomous tone forced me to open my eyes to our distorted reflections. Her hair and skin were like mine, nappy and covered in freckles. We wore the same clothes we had been wearing that night. Our hands dripped with thick, red blood.

I tried to turn and face Angel, but she wouldn't let me go. She squeezed my arms tighter, smearing the blood from her hands all over my arms and shirt.

"You have to face your truth, Skye. Trust me," Angel whispered near my ear. Defeated, heavy tears splashed onto my flustered face. The room suddenly became a blur as I felt myself falling into a black hole of despair.

How could I fight what I couldn't control but controlled me and everyone around me? I was never going to win here.

"You need to go!" Angel pushed me into the mirror and my bloody handprints stained the glass as I caught my balance.

I quickly turned to face her, but she vanished, the echoes of her giggles lingering in my eardrums. I shook my head hard to lose them, but her strong and powerful voice prevailed.

"They're coming for you, Skye! Get out of here—now!"

I looked back at the mirror and my reflection pointed to the open window.

"Go!" Angel's voice urged me, and I nodded and climbed out to the roof.

It was finally time for me to be free. I inched my way closer and closer to the edge.

"You're almost there," Angel's voice whispered. *"Go on and spread your wings and fly."*

A swift breeze whipped through my hair and kissed my cheek as I opened my arms wide. I fell forward and felt the air race past me as I flew.

My wings took me straight to the ground, where my body went splat, and the world went black.

THE END OF MY STORY

Darkness surrounds me at first, but then light slowly peeks through. The pain I feel lets me know my beautifully crafted wings are ready.

I ache to escape this place—a prison I wake up to each day.

No longer weighed down by the ball and chain of my misery, I burn to soar toward the light. My freedom is close.

My path shines bright as I stretch my wings wide, ecstatic my wish finally came true.

Well, sort of ...

I thought a butterfly would save me and set me free—

But it was me, her Angel.

Skye was finally free ... thanks to me.

I was that extra push she needed to escape this wicked world.

“Go on,” I whispered.

She hesitated, but I nudged her to the edge.

“Spread your wings and fly.”

My words moved through her like the wind that carried her away.

If I hadn't come along and rescued this girl from this place, they were going to hurt her, and she couldn't see they were going to hurt her until I made her see it.

She didn't trust me at first, scared I would be just like the others, but I showed her I was different.

I showed her the truth that night ...

The night she killed her parents.

THE TRUTH

By Angel

“Skye!” Venus, Skye’s mom, yelled from the kitchen of their family’s apartment.

Skye sat a few feet away in the living room, bobbing her head to the music that blasted from the old, small Zenith TV.

“Skye!” Venus called again, but Skye tuned her out.

Aaliyah’s “If Your Girl Only Knew” video was on, the only video Skye waited for on the music channel, The Box. It was a rare occasion for that channel to play her favorite jam, even when requested by Skye herself, so to finally see it after hawking the TV all day, there was no way Skye was going to let her mother ruin this moment.

She lip-synched her heart out, paying no mind to Venus’s strained and pleading voice.

“Skye Angelica Dove! I know you hear me talking to you! Turn that TV down before you blow out your eardrums!” Agitation flushed Venus’s vanilla wafer complexion as she turned from the stove and pierced Skye with her best stern look. “I’m not going to tell you again!”

Skye glared at Venus, quickly, with a stern look of her own, but then grabbed the remote and obliged her mother.

Relieved, Venus turned back to the pot of boiling noodles on the stove and turned off the burner. “Dinner’s almost ready. I’m making your favorite!” She grinned in excitement and peeked at Skye for a reaction, but Skye gave none.

Skye’s nose was deep in her work as she sat in the middle of the floor. Her tattered art diary rested in front of her on the glass coffee table, along with her assortment of colored pencils and glitter pens.

Half-unpacked cardboard boxes surrounded Skye and lined the apartment, making the already small space even more cramped. It was way smaller than their last place, but her parents were grateful and lucky to grab it on such short notice and funds after being evicted from their old apartment a few days ago.

They got the boot when Skye tried to light a neighbor's pitbull on fire and then tried to set the neighbor on fire when he threatened to call the cops.

Harsh, I know, but in Skye's defense, both bastards had it coming. The little bastard used to bark at Skye a little too aggressively and even nipped at her ankles a few times. The bastard owner never did anything to protect Skye, so Skye did what she had to do to protect herself.

I personally didn't see anything wrong with what Skye did, but there was a lot of hoopla from everyone else, and the Doves had to find a new crash fast.

Skye's unpredictable behavior usually put the family in sticky situations her father could fix with his swift tongue of persuasion or sometimes even free auto work, but this time he was defeated and the family paid a big price. It was either the streets or settle for a one-bedroom, and of course her parents chose the obvious, which Skye hated.

The tight living room doubled as Skye's bedroom, making her feel violated and trapped. Her only sense of privacy was the special art diary filled with her dreams and wishes to escape.

Skye didn't know it yet, but I was there to be those dreams and wishes.

"Pretty," I said, and Skye stopped sketching for a moment, but then she quickly went back to work on the newest butterfly girl like nothing had happened.

Unlike the other butterfly girls Skye routinely created, this one had only one wing. She was naked, with a thick cascade of straight hair shielding her private regions. Her eyes were colored coal-black, with a lick of gold and a flare of red.

“Where’s her other wing?” I asked, but Skye ignored me, focusing on precision. My patience was always tested when Skye ignored me. I had to remember she needed time to make sure I was nothing like the others, but it still pissed me off how she treated me like them.

I learned to keep my cool, though, because I was here to protect Skye, and she was going to learn that soon enough.

“Do you want garlic bread to go with your spaghetti?”

Venus’s voice finally caught Skye’s attention. She looked up and nodded quickly before looking back down to her broken butterfly.

“What’s her name?” I asked, and Skye shrugged.

“How is she going to fly?” Skye shrugged again.

“How cool would it be if you could fly?” I hummed lightly in her ear.

Fixated on her drawing, Skye didn’t respond, but I knew I lit something inside her heart. A spark of fire to be free.

“Do you want to fly out of here?” Skye didn’t answer.

“I’ll be your wings,” I offered. Then the spark bled into a full blaze.

I had her ... until her father suddenly stormed into the house and extinguished Skye’s blaze into a cloud of smoke. The sight of him made Skye shrink back into her misery and lose all hope of freedom.

“What the hell happened today, Venus?” Leroy roared, his voice rattling the apartment’s thin walls. “Why did I just get a call at work from the doctor’s office looking for Skye? You know I hate when they call me on my good job, damn it!”

Unbothered by Leroy’s tone and attitude, Venus calmly continued to prepare dinner.

“Welcome home, Lee. Dinner’s almost ready,” *she replied while placing a cookie sheet of frozen garlic bread in the oven.* “Go smoke and relax, okay? It’ll be time to eat soon enough.”

“Don’t piss me the fuck off, Venus!” *Leroy’s freckled and butterscotch complexion turned red as his anger threatened to erupt.* “I’m not in the mood for your bullshit!”

I hated Leroy.

I hated him even more when he grabbed Venus’s arm and yanked her toward him so she would face him. His six-foot-five frame loomed over her petite form like a dark tower.

“Did you take Skye to her appointment?” *he demanded, his anger blowing its gasket and spewing out.*

Venus remained calm. “She didn’t need to go.”

“Fuck! Do you know how hard it was to get that appointment?” *Leroy jerked Venus hard.*

“She didn’t need it in the first place!” *Venus yanked her arm out of Leroy’s grasp and went back to the stove.* “Fuck that appointment and those doctors! They don’t know shit about my baby or what’s best for her.”

“You’re not going to keep doing this!” *Leroy warned.*

Venus ignored him and fixed a plate of spaghetti, piling the pasta high, just how Skye liked it. She always made Skye’s plate first.

“Come eat!” *she called out in the light tone she used to keep Skye at ease, but it was too late.*

Skye’s nerves popped like water in hot grease throughout her body. Her parents’ arguments, which always stemmed from something Skye did, never bothered her because it was so routine, but this time was different. She felt a burn in her chest, but it wasn’t the fire of

freedom. Watching her parents battle created a flame of guilt that ignited more misery. I had to save Skye before I lost her in the fire.

“I think you should get out of here. They’re plotting to take you out,” I warned, but Skye ignored me. So I got louder. “They never wanted you here, Skye. Listen to how much they hate you.”

Leroy and Venus’s voices escalated, torturing Skye’s eardrums.

“I don’t give a fuck what you say, Venus! I’m taking her!”

“So they can pump her with that poison?”

“See?” I explained to Skye. “They’re trying to poison you!”

Skye shook her head no, pissing me off for real. She was doubting me like she did the others, and I already told her I was nothing like them! They tormented Skye with twisted thoughts and manipulated her actions. I was different.

Like I keep saying, I was here to protect Skye. My job was to save her, so she had to listen to me.

“They don’t love you, Skye. They’re—”

Skye grabbed the remote and turned the TV volume back up. This time, she mashed the button until it reached its max, cancelling out Leroy, Venus, and me. Busta Rhymes startled the battle to a screeching halt.

“Turn that damn TV down!” Leroy ordered.

Skye heard him and ignored him.

“I said turn that motherfucking TV down!” he ordered again, this time moving toward Skye.

The two locked eyes, sharing identical gray gazes of hate and disappointment.

“If I have to tell your ass one more time!” Leroy warned and reached for that worn leather belt that held up his oil-stained work pants.

Like a ferocious mama bear, Venus rushed over in a flash to aid her cub. She kneeled down and pulled Skye into her arms, shielding Skye from Leroy’s wrath. They flinched when Leroy lunged forward and snatched the remote out of Skye’s hand. He turned off the TV before throwing the remote at the wall.

“I’m so sick of your shit, Skye!” Leroy shouted, fuming with fury.

“Don’t you talk to her like that!” Venus snapped.

“I’m sick of your shit, too!” he snapped back at Venus. “It’s because of you she acts like this!”

“She’s just upset right now!” Venus lied as she pulled Skye closer, her face vanishing in Skye’s massive mane.

It was Venus’s favorite lie to protect herself from her true feelings. I knew Venus hated Skye just as much as Leroy did, but she masked it well in the motherly acts of comforting hugs, encouraging words, and devoted care, despite the fact she saw Skye as a monster.

“It’s going to be okay,” Venus lied again, looking up at Leroy with pleading eyes.

Skye’s whole body was on fire now. She knew it wasn’t going to be okay once Leroy backhanded Venus. Venus ate it, infuriating Leroy to attack again. He hit her harder, sending Venus to the floor.

I had to get Skye out of there.

I had to save Skye from these people.

“You have to go, Skye!”

She jumped up, unsure of where to go.

“HURRY! GO NOW!” I screamed for her to escape, and she turned to the balcony and ran outside.

Leroy’s hits and Venus’s cries were instantly silenced once she slammed the sliding glass door behind her, bringing a little slice of peace. She had no idea how close we were to the whole fucking pie.

The magenta- and lavender-colored sky pulled Skye toward the railing for a closer look. A bright orange glow peeked through the lingering clouds, revealing Skye’s path to freedom. I could feel her heart aching to race toward the setting sun, wanting her own sun to set, too.

“You can do it,” I nudged her. “You can fly away.”

Skye gripped the railing and looked down four stories. A slight panic threatened to butcher our plans to escape, so I had to reassure her.

“You can do it.”

Skye hesitated.

“Do it! You don’t have much time!” I pressed, and Skye climbed the railing.

The sun was almost gone, close to abandoning her in the night air. She had to go now.

“DO IT!” I shouted one last time.

Skye closed her eyes and slowly loosened her grip on the railing, yearning to spread her wings. She was so close to takeoff when a loud crash from inside the apartment startled her.

“No!” I cried out, annoyed.

Skye stepped off the railing, irritating me even more. We were so close!

“Come on!” I nearly whined. “Do it!”

Skye ignored me and walked back to the glass door to peek inside. She immediately jumped back, frightened, as the door slid open and Venus stepped out, battered and bruised. A black eye marked her face, along with a bloody nose and a swollen lip.

“Don’t worry. I’m fine.” Venus smiled to comfort Skye, but quickly winced in pain. She reached up to touch her face, revealing the bloody butcher knife she held tightly in her hand.

Skye’s eyes widened in fear as she looked for an escape route.

“It’s okay, Skye. This is going to help us.” Venus gestured toward the knife. “I promise they’re not going to get you.”

Venus moved forward while Skye moved back. She stopped short once her back hit the railing and looked down at the ground.

“You know what you have to do,” I told her as Venus moved closer, ready to plunge that knife deep into her flesh. “It’s your only way out!”

Venus suddenly swung at Skye with the knife, and Skye dodged it before kicking Venus hard in the stomach. Venus let out a harsh grunt as she stumbled back a little and doubled over in pain. Skye saw that as her chance to take off toward the door, but Venus gathered herself quickly and blocked Skye’s path, with that knife as her backup.

“Skye, please! Let me help you, okay?” Venus pleaded. “I love you so much!”

“Lies!” I shouted.

“I just want to save you!” Venus lied again, forcing fake tears so Skye would fall for her bullshit.

It worked when Skye was little, but now Skye knew better. Especially since I was here now.

“Don’t listen to what she’s saying, Skye! She’s here to hurt you, not help you. I’m the one who’s going to save you!” I reminded Skye, just as Venus charged at her with the little strength she had left.

Skye dodged the attack again, sending Venus right over the railing this time.

It all happened so fast.

Both Skye and I were too stunned to look, but a loud thud confirmed Venus’s landing.

Within seconds, a paralyzing scream rang out, followed by a chorus of panicked voices.

“Somebody call the cops!”

“No! She needs an ambulance! Call an ambulance!”

“Oh my heavens! Is she dead?”

Skye slipped into a state of shock, her emotions overwhelming her senses. She was about to fall apart, but I needed her to keep it together.

“You know it’s not your fault, right? You won’t get in trouble for this because it’s not your fault!” I tried to reassure her as she peeked over the railing, but she had already cracked at the sight of Venus’s mangled body.

Blood stained the concrete of the patio Venus landed on, draining from the back of her head, her ears, and her mouth.

It wasn’t a pretty sight.

Mortified, Skye rushed inside. She barely made it in before she tripped over Leroy’s legs. He lay sprawled out in a bed of shattered glass with stab wounds in his neck and chest.

Skye picked herself up and stood over her father’s bloody body as he gasped desperately for breath. The two locked their identical gazes on one another, and Leroy weakly reached out his blood-soaked hand.

“Please,” he whispered.

Skye reached out her hand, and their fingers only grazed before she snatched away to kneel down and pick up her art diary.

Leroy gasped for more air, using up his last bit of life. His hand dropped, and he surrendered to death.

Sirens echoed from outside, which meant they were coming. It wasn't too late for Skye to escape.

“Now is the time,” I told her, but Skye shook her head as if she was trying to shake me away. Her mind raced with thoughts of what was to come next. Tears fell from her eyes as the sirens got louder.

Skye dropped to the floor and sat cross-legged with her art diary nestled in her lap. Blood stained her fingers and smeared the pages as she flipped to the last butterfly girl.

“It's not your fault,” I reminded Skye again; again, she shook her head.

Skye unzipped her book bag and pulled out her Walkman.

The sirens echoed louder outside.

Skye placed the headphones over her mane, pushed play, and allowed Aaliyah's voice to take her out of the world.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

A bright light shines over me. So bright, it bleeds through my closed eyes as I come to. I want to move but can't because of the pain. Everything burns and aches.

Everything!

It is so intense that my eyelids hurt as I try to pry them open. The light blurs my vision and makes me feel dizzy, even though I'm lying down.

Cold air and white surround me.

Am I floating in the clouds?

Did I make it to heaven?

I try to sit up and look around, but my neck is stiff, locked in place. I try to reach up, but my arms are pinned to my sides. The pain is agonizing as I struggle to free myself.

I'm trapped!

What's happening?

How could this be heaven? Wasn't this place supposed to be peaceful?

Pain free?

I don't understand what's going on!

"It's over, Skye."

Her voice startles me at first, but then I'm quickly relieved. We're saved!

Fighting the pain, I manage to turn my gaze a little and see Angel standing before me. She giggles, despite her messed-up appearance. Her usually smooth hair is tangled, and that pretty and polished complexion looks dull. She wears a torn and dingy white nightgown that barely clings to her body.

Angel suddenly stops giggling and glares at me with those fiery black eyes. "*It's over!*" she screams.

I look at her, confused. Why is she pissed with me?

I move to go toward her, but I'm stuck.

Looking down, I see thick leather straps across my chest, arms, and stomach, restraining me in the bed. My legs are weighed down by two heavy casts that expose only my toes. I wiggle them, causing sharp pains to race through my limbs.

Angel stands at the end of the bed and shakes her head. She stares at me with pity dripping from her eyes, along with tears.

"*They got us.*" She holds up her shackled hands and cries harder.

I'm so stunned. I never thought I would see Angel cry.

I fight the restraints and she shakes her head again. "*Don't even try it.*"

I fight the restraints harder this time, determined to escape. How could Angel give up?
We can do this!

I search the small white room for an exit. There are no windows, but I see a door with four bolt locks attached. All Angel needs to do is unlock them, and we will be free! Those shackles didn't chain her fingers!

I look at her for hope, but her eyes are empty.

"*It's too late,*" Angel mutters, and I lie back, defeated.

I want to cry, but it hurts too much. I have to accept this pain that will haunt me for all eternity.

“Welcome to hell,” Angel smirks just as the door swings open and a lady dressed in crisp, white scrubs strolls into the room pushing a squeaky metal cart. Her dark skin makes her uniform look super white.

She hums a tune as she pulls up to the bed and shuffles whatever’s on that cart. I peek over and see syringes with long needles, and I immediately fight the leather straps. The lady looks down at me and smiles, probably mocking my vain attempt to break free.

“Welcome back, sleepy head. Are you ready to eat?”

I respond by screaming at the top of my lungs and she raises my bed to an upright position before turning back to the cart. She’s totally unbothered.

I hear pill bottles rattling and water splashing just as two brute and bulky guards dressed in bright-red, military-style uniforms storm into the room. The lady shoves two small paper cups of water and pills in my face while the guards grab Angel.

I scream along with Angel as they try to drag her out of the room. Pushing against the straps, I fight to escape and rescue her.

I’m frantic now. I have to save Angel!

“Come on, sweetie,” the lady’s voice attempts to soothe me. *“Go on and take these so we can get you calmed down.”*

She takes a pill out of the cup and pushes it toward my mouth. I try my best to turn away, but the brace around my neck makes it impossible, so I tighten my lips instead. I glance at Angel putting up one hell of a fight. I know she isn’t going to let them win.

“Don’t fight, baby,” the lady insists, trying to force the pill as gently as she can between my lips.

That's when I decide to help her and open my mouth, only to lock down on her finger with my teeth. She screams and snatches her hand back, spilling the water all over her white uniform. She glares at me for a moment before going back to her smile and turning to the cart.

Suddenly, a third guard, way more brutish and bulkier than the other two, charges into the room to help with the resistant Angel. Angel fights even harder as the lady turns back to me, holding a syringe with a long needle.

“Sorry, honey, you’re going to feel a little sting.”

“*No!*” Angel cries out. She is quickly silenced by a punch to the back of the head from the really big guard. She’s knocked out cold and falls limp in the guards’ arms right as I feel the fiery pinch on my skin. The lady digs the needle deep into my thigh, and I scream until I can’t scream anymore.

Within moments, I feel relaxed. Angel is dragged out of the room. Groggy, I watch the door close behind them.

My eyelids become heavy before it all goes black again.

END