

## Chapter Two

Today

Lexington, Virginia – Winter

Strong, firm, and confident. The hands around her waist were everything a man's hands were supposed to be. They led her step gently, conscious of her awkward feet. When her toes caught the polished floor, they'd steadied her before she had even stumbled. When she was to turn, to spin, or to take a step back or forward, they gave her silent guidance, communicating in tandem with only his eyes — green as an emerald forest, they had always been a hair too big for the rest of his face.

The orchestra played for what must have been hours. Above the music, she heard the occasional giggle, bits of mushy conversation between the many purportedly happy couples who'd come. Most of them were; her class had graduated from the Institute, and a great many of her classmates would be coming home. She wondered if the pairs as quiet as she and Louis held those who wouldn't.

When the music stopped, she kissed his cheek.

The small talk began. Those she had called "friend" came to share congratulations. They were happy for her; she was happy for them. The same conversation repeated itself until the day sought refuge in dawn:

Can you believe it's over?

Where are you going from here?

Keep in touch?

Her answer to the latter was always "yes"; the truth was always "no". It was fitting, really. Neither she nor Louis had told the truth in four years. Why start now?

The end was relief. When most had gone home and those that remained were buried deep in lingering conversation, he took her hand — palms facing away, fingers roped together, just as they had since the second grade.

They found a secluded bench beneath a sprawling oak. Her dark blue eyes met his. He smiled — a knowing, boyish smirk that denied his wisdom.

"Well," he quipped, heavy with his favorite fake lisp.

She grinned. "Well," she growled, only to shudder. She clutched her jacket around her shoulders, guarding herself from the winter air. Louis was lucky. His tux had to be warmer than this stupid little dress.

"A little hard to believe we're done here. Four years. It seems so... short." A tired hand rose to his head, fingers brushing through short red hair.

She arched a brow. "Short? Longest four years of my *life*."

His smile fell a bit, a subtle seriousness behind it that few but her could detect. "Vala, you said the same thing about high school."

"Yes, well," she sighed, leaning back and stretching her arms behind her head. She winced, counting the pops and crackles, and then curled her arms together again. "At least I didn't spend high school in fuckin' Narnia."

Louis cackled, dropping his square jaw into a hand to muffle his laughter. When he finally regained his composure, he ruffled his friend's short, blonde mop. "How is Rebekkah, anyway?"

Her grin wavered. "She's... good. I guess. We're doing well, and she..." Vala paused, grasping for words, "... supports this. She doesn't want to hold me back. But... well, you get it." She forced a smile. "And Jerry?"

"Mm." He took a deep breath. "He's alright, considering. I'm flying to Dallas before I deploy. His father isn't well; not a good time for him to travel."

She bit her lip. “Jer’s old man isn’t... going to get better, huh.”

Louis shook his head. “No. It’s been a year since Jerry moved back home. Last week, they gave his pop two months.”

Vala deflated. After a short silence, she stood, stretching again. “I... should probably get going. I told Rebutter I’d be home in time to watch The Last Unicorn before bed tomorrow. Florida is a long drive.”

“You know, that peg leg cat is *almost* as manly as you are.”

Her palm met her face. “Goodnight, Louis. Try not to redecorate at your in- laws’. I hear feng shui isn’t real big in Texas.”