

CHAPTER ONE

I looked around my room for the last time. I was leaving.

Finally.
For good.

There was only one way I'd ever return to the town of Christmas, Florida, and it involved my dead body. Which meant I needed to make sure I had everything. I fished my iPod out of the front pocket of my old duffel and hit play. Putting in my earbuds, I did a quick inventory of my stuff.

I had my clothes, of course. Not too many of those. Working the evening shift at Fuddruckers didn't exactly buy someone a passport to fashion. What I did own was mostly cheap and mostly black, though I had managed to collect a few prized possessions. A vintage *Pretenders* T-shirt. Fingerless gloves in an awesome plummy black color. An ancient pair of Converse sneakers, broken in just right.

My bag was heavy with books, too. I was a little worried the zipper would pop from the strain, but there was no way I'd leave without them.

My French-English dictionary was especially gigantic. It was unabridged, and had cost several days of hard-won waitressing tips. But it held such promise, like I might be jetting off to Paris any day, where I'd sit around in bistros, grappling with issues and nibbling madeleines.

And then there was my biggest treasure of all: a framed picture of my mother. I patted the top of the duffel, feeling for its hard profile, checking for the umpteenth time that I'd packed it.

She'd died when I was only four. For some reason everyone took great pains to assure me there was no way I could possibly remember her. I'd look at the photo in secret, though, and I could still hear her voice and smell her crisp, lemony scent. With her blond hair and wide eyes, she reminded me of Uma Thurman, and I liked to imagine her wearing a tight yellow pantsuit, kicking my dad's ass, *Kill Bill*-style.

Dad. Ah, the sound of shouting and the stench of warm Coors. Now, those were some personal gems I wouldn't stow away in the old duffel, even if I could.

"Bye- bye, Daddy Dearest. I am so out of here. Not that you'll notice." I pulled my iPod back out of my pocket and zipped through the playlist to my favorite Radiohead song. Standing up to check my drawers one last time, I bellowed out the lyrics. "*I don't belong here. . . .*"

"Annelise Drew!" Somebody banged on the door. "Shut the hell up!"

I scowled. It was my stepmother, *the Yatch*.

ISLE OF NIGHT by Veronica Wolff -- excerpt

So I turned up the volume and sang even louder. *"But I'm a creep. . . ."*

"I'm trying to get some rest," she screamed from the other side of the door.

"Oh yeah." I tore out the earbuds. "Because it's eleven in the morning and you've been working since dawn?"

"You think you're so special," she shouted. "Genius? You're a *freak*. And now you graduate early from high school, and we're supposed to think you're *so special*."

I smirked at how her words echoed the lyrics, and opened the door to the sight of her pale, haggard face. *The Yatch*. It was my pet name for her, the progression having gone a little something like *Beatrice . . . Bee-yatch . . . Yatch*.

"What are *you* laughing at?" The faint bruise on the side of her cheek had paled to a sickly yellow.

Imagine that. She'd fallen in the shower. Again.

Just ask Daddy.

I shook my head. It was a two-bedroom apartment—there was nothing to hide. I'd "fallen in the shower" before, too.

"Don't give me that holier-than-thou look, young lady."

She shouldered her way in, peering around the room as though I'd been caught trying to steal the family silver. "Have I heard a thank-you for all I've done for you, all these years?"

"No," I said, after a moment of elaborate contemplation. "I don't imagine you have."

Her eyes skittered nervously from me. She never had been good at standing up for herself. I imagined it was why Daddy kept her around.

She scanned what remained of my belongings, her gaze lingering on the threadbare bedspread I'd had since I was eight, when I'd liked all things lavender. Believe me—nine years is a long time in which to learn to despise a color. "You're welcome to keep that," I assured her.

"You better clean this crap up," she said instead, her voice shrill with disbelief. You'd have thought I'd left her a steaming turd right there in the middle of the tan shag rug. Her eyes came back to me. "Or were you going to sneak out like a thief?"

A little something like that, yeah. I remained silent.

"Where the hell have *you* got to go, anyway? It's not like you've got any friends."

Friends.

I thought of the crowd at Dale R. Fielding High School. A bunch of half-wits who spent their time going to the mall or making out, or doing whatever it is kids my age did to fill their time.

As if.

No, *I* was going to college, thankyouverymuch. Not that I'd ever tell them that. They'd just suspect me of embezzling tuition money from Dad's vast stores of wealth. Which was a laugh. If there was any money, it came from a disability check

ISLE OF NIGHT by Veronica Wolff -- excerpt

he'd probably drank away long ago.

No, I was going to college *tuition free*. It was one of the bennies of having a genius IQ and crazy-high GPA. My preference was to get the hell out of Florida, and though my guidance counselor said I could get a scholarship wherever I wanted, fancy private schools didn't take Needs Cases (gag) like me midyear. Graduating from high school one semester early was the best I could wrangle, and so it was state school for me.

"I suppose you think you're taking that car you've been driving." The Yatch crossed her arms, believing she'd gotten one over on me. "But who do you think has been paying for your insurance?"

"I've been paying for my insurance, just like I paid for the car." I glared, challenging her to just try to argue.

"Bea!" Daddy Dearest crowed from the other room.

My stepmother and I continued our silent stare-off. Finally she snarled, "You think just because you're smarter than the rest of us—"

"Bea! Get in here!"

God forbid the man got up from the Barcalounger to grab his own freshie from the refrigerator. He had no idea I was leaving, and wouldn't care if he did. I gave her my best saccharine sweet smile. "I think Daddy needs another tall boy."

The Yatch shot me a final scowl and bustled into the living room.

Out. Of. Here. I heaved my duffel onto my shoulder, giving a farewell glance to the Einstein poster on my wall. He was sticking his tongue out at me, and I stuck out mine right back. "Ciao for now, Al."

I snuck out the front door and was on my way.

CHAPTER TWO

Florida is famous for a variety of things:

1. Disney World
2. Serial killers
3. Bizarre alligator accidents
4. Bizarre lightning accidents
5. Ginormous universities

A fan of neither princesses nor pain, it was number five for me. *Gator Nation*, God help me. But hey, say what you will—the University of Florida in Gainesville wasn't exactly Paris, but it was a start.

I drove my Honda carefully, winding through campus, goggling at all the crazy architecture as I went. I was hot and sweaty after three hours of driving with a broken AC and the sun broiling overhead, but still, nervous excitement surged through me. So what if the stately brick buildings were surrounded by spindly palm trees instead of ivy? This was *college*.

I popped a chocolate madeleine for courage.

UF had more than fifty thousand students. Surely there'd be some other misfits like me. Surely there was at least one other girl on campus not sporting a French pedicure (do girls *really* think we're fooled by the little white lines painted across their toenails?), who had some black in her wardrobe, and actually thought about things. You know, someone who knew the word *French* could imply more than just a way to kiss.

Surely I'd make a friend. Right?

I downshifted my little Civic, pulling into the parking lot off Museum Road. I didn't need to look at the campus map for directions—I'd already memorized the thing. In fact, the moment the school catalog arrived in the mail, I'd studied every single aspect, inside and out, up to and including the bedbug advisory.

Walking into the registrar's office, the blast of air-conditioning made my skin crawl. That was another thing that really freaked me out about this state: Cooling a room was one thing, but the compulsive need to superchill every indoor space to a brisk sixty-three degrees confounded me. It was January, for crissakes.

I shoved my favorite hat farther down on my head. It was a beige raffia fedora with a narrow brim, sort of like something you'd see on an old Cuban man. Mostly I wore it to tone down my conspicuously blond hair. But it wasn't without its practical applications—I was feeling a little less chilly already.

Once my eyes adjusted, I spotted the bouffy-haired receptionist. She sat in a little glass-fronted kiosk that made her look like one of those old-fashioned carnival fortune-tellers. She was

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greeting each new student with a forced, coral-lipsticked smile.

If you resent teenagers so much, don't work at a college, lady. She caught my eye, and I returned her stiff smile.

But it froze the moment I saw *him*.

Tall, dark, and *hot* leaned against a pillar, watching me as I took my place in line. Tousled dark hair went every which way on his head. His eyes were slitted and intense, like he might need to have sex at any moment. Maybe even with me.

I had to look down, I was so flustered. I felt like *I'd* been the one caught staring.

But just as my eyes flitted away, I caught a glimpse of the tattoo peeking out from under his T-shirt sleeve. It was a quote.

Something niggled in the back of my mind and I looked back, feeling my cheeks blaze red with the fear that he was still watching me.

The first half of the quote was obscured, but the end bit was clear: *c'est le paradis perdu*.

My breath caught. Goose bumps rippled across my skin in a way that had nothing to do with the excessive air-conditioning. I knew the line well. *Le seul paradis c'est le paradis perdu*.

The only paradise is paradise lost.

Wow. My first college boy, and he liked *Proust*. I'd found home at last.

Holding my breath, I forced myself to raise my eyes to his. His hair was dark but his eyes were . . . lighter. Green. They locked with mine, and the rest of the world fell away.

The receptionist called my turn and I stepped forward, a ventriloquist dummy's grin pasted on my face. I tried not to trip. God, I was such an idiot.

"Hi," I said to the lady, thrilled that I'd managed to get a word out despite the college boy's laser-sex stare. "I'm here to . . . I'm here. I need to register."

Such an idiot.

"Name," she croaked, bringing me back to the matter at hand.

I gave her my facts, wondering if the college boy was still watching me. Clenching my hands, I forced myself to stop fidgeting.

He was the kind of guy I dreamed about. At least he seemed like my ideal. Smart and worldly. He'd drink espresso with a twist, and do the Sunday crossword, and recite lines of intense and passionate poetry from memory. He'd appreciate a bright and quick-witted companion. He'd see *me* as a bright and quick-witted companion—not a weirdo with a freaky-high IQ. Just a girl who was really good at *Jeopardy!* and some of the more obscure Germanic languages.

I'd even do the whole French-manicure thing if it meant attracting a guy like him. Did sophisticated college guys think that was sexy? I stole a look at my chipped, stubby nails.

I was supposed to have a mom around who could give me

advice. I'd always felt like the other girls had been issued some sort of Girl Handbook that I just wasn't privy to. How had my mother worn *her* nails? Long press-ons the color of berries, or short like mine?

“. . . I'm sorry," the woman was saying. The smile on her face was almost real, and it alarmed me.

"Sorry?" My fake grin was back up like a photon shield.

"Wait. What did you say?"

"I said, you can't matriculate until you've been issued a diploma."

Did they need to see a piece of paper or something? I racked my brain, trying to remember whether I'd been given an official document among all the other reams of paper I'd received.

"What are you talking about?"

"You need to finish high school before you start college."

"But I did finish high school. I *graduated*."

"Not yet, you didn't." She gave me a condescending smile.

It made me want to smash her little windowpane. I gripped the counter. "I did. In December. I'm registered for the spring semester."

Tap, tap, tap. Those fuchsia nails flew over the keyboard. "I'm afraid the best I can do is defer your enrollment to the fall semester."

"Wait." I leaned my forehead against her window. "Are you sure you have the right person? *Annelise Drew*? Dale R. Fielding High School."

"Yes." Behind the glass, her eyes narrowed, making her look like a pinched, angry Muppet in some *Office of the Registrar* puppet show. "They haven't issued your diploma. We can't accept you without a full transcript. Officially, you're still in high school."

"No." Not possible. *Not effing possible*. I could *not* still be in high school. I thought I might vomit. "That's impossible."

She tapped some more on her computer. Her fake smile crackled into a frosty glare. "You need to pass your swim test."

"Swim test?" I practically shrieked the words, distantly aware that I was no longer conscious of the cute college guy. My dignity was shot, anyhow, if I wasn't even going to be recognized as a *high school graduate*. "Is this a joke? There's no swim test at Fielding."

"I don't joke, young lady." Mrs. Registrar was getting snippy. *Tap, tap, tap.* "Dale R. Fielding High School. New procedure."

Tap, tap. "A swim test will be administered at the end of each academic year." *Tap tap tap tap tap.* "There was an endowment requiring all students to pass a swim test in order to graduate."

"I'm still in high school," I mumbled like a zombie. My head buzzed, and my fingers felt icy and thick as I shoved my paperwork back into my messenger bag. *Still a high schooler.*

"You need to go back to high school, take the test, and return in the fall."

ISLE OF NIGHT by Veronica Wolff -- excerpt

I could only stare blankly. I'd rather die than go back to Christmas.

Trying to give me the hint, she looked to the person behind me in line. "Just pass the test, Miss Drew."

Thanks, Sherlock. "But I can't swim."

Shock and pity dropped across the woman's face like a veil. Everyone in Florida could swim. They practically handed out droppers of *Swim-Ear* to newborns in the hospital. Everyone had a damned pool, every kid was on swim team, every Caucasian face was tanned, every body smelled of chlorine and snack-bar ketchup.

"I'm afraid you need to sort this out with your school. Perhaps we'll see you in September." Her gaze went to the line forming behind me, her forced smile already back in place. "*Next.*"

I mumbled something—who knows what?—and stumbled out of the registrar's office. At least the hot college boy was no longer standing there. Maybe he didn't witness my shame. I emerged from the refrigeration and somehow made it back to the car.

But there he was in the parking lot. The sight of Mr. Tall/Dark/Tousled leaning against a very shiny, very expensive looking sports car made my eyes burn with tears. As God was my witness, I would *not* be the *high schooler* who cried in front of the good-looking college guy.

I snuck another glance his way. Such an *adult* car. In a green so dark it looked black. Only someone as gorgeous as him could pull it off without irony.

Clumsily unlocking the door to my Civic, I dropped into the bucket seat, its cracked vinyl squeaking with my weight. I slumped close to the steering wheel.

I would get out of there with a modicum of dignity.

I would *not* cry.

Nor would I hit any person or thing on the way out of the lot.

Buckling my seat belt, I turned the key. There was a click and then nothing.

"No," I whispered. *No, no, no.* I slapped my hands on the dashboard. "Wake up."

It'd taken me *years* to save up for this hunk of junk. I'd endured hours of tutoring meathead boys who thought casting lingering stares at my almost nonexistent bosom would make me wilt with desire. I'd sold term papers on eBay. And of course there was Fuddruckers, which, BTW, falls in the same constellation of life experience as setting one's hair on fire or enduring an *America's Next Top Model* marathon.

My car would *not* die on me now, in the parking lot, in front of this guy whose half-lidded stare was boring a hole into the side of my head. Witnessing me, at the pinnacle of my loserdom. I beat my hands against the steering wheel for good measure.

Again I turned the key. Again, *click-click-click*, then nothing.

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I couldn't even swear up a storm; my tongue felt paralyzed with *him* watching me. *Crap.*

Was it the ignition? How much did it cost to fix something like that? Hundreds? More than that, even?

Fan-freaking-tastic. What was I supposed to do now? I was way the hell in the middle of *Gainesville*. I couldn't call home. I had a big picture of how *that* would go. The Yatch would go ballistic, and Dad would just scowl, belch, and then demand the remote. Or would he smack me instead for spending all that money on gas when he could've spent it on beer? I swallowed the ache in my throat.

I couldn't go back to that. I *wouldn't* go back.

No college, no place to live, no car, not enough money to fix the car . . . Tears of frustration stung my eyes and rolled hot down my cheeks. *Why this? Why me? Why now? Could the universe just please cut me one break, for once in my life?*

There was movement in my peripheral vision. He was walking over.

Oh, crap. I scrubbed my face, certain I was leaving inky trails of eyeliner all over what were surely splotchy, puffy cheeks.

He came right up to my driver's-side window. His eyes were looking *really* intense now, like he was the Terminator and he needed to scan my body for radioactivity. His key ring was looped on his finger, and he was flipping it deftly around and around. Tall, dark, hot, *and smooth.*

My mouth went dry. He gave me a slow, predatory smile. But I was still just a *high schooler*, with an awkwardly high IQ and a broken-down '92 Civic.

This was not happening.

CHAPTER THREE

Trouble?" He smiled, and up close I saw he had slightly

crooked teeth, but somehow it only made him hotter.

Like he'd been too masculine to suffer through something as trivial as braces for something as inconsequential as vanity. "Lift the bonnet for me, aye?"

Oh, God . . . He had an accent. I knew custom required a response, but I could only gape.

He smiled again. His snaggle-toothed accent gave the impression that a young Gerard Butler had stepped off a movie screen and stood before me, live and in 3-D.

"I said, pop the bonnet, love." He spoke slowly this time, as if I'd fallen too hard off the short bus that morning.

Must respond. Bonnet. WTF is a bonnet?

He just stood there waiting. I clamped my slack jaw shut. High schooler, maybe, but I would not be mistaken for a mouth-breather. I followed the line of his eyes. "Ohh, the hood. Yeah, got it."

Pop the hood. Check. I got out of the car just as he leaned over to peer at my engine.

As I mentioned before, I'm no dummy. I took the opportunity to assess a tight butt and pair of muscular legs. I love a guy who wears just straight-up jeans. No fancy metrosexual nonsense, just an old, worn pair of Levi's. I wondered whether they were button fly.

He straightened, and I managed to tear my eyes from his nether parts before he caught me staring. "I think it's your carb," he said, clapping the grease from his hands.

"The only carb I know is the bagel I had for breakfast." My face froze in place, shocked at the idiocy of my own joke. *Moron! I am such a moron.*

He just stared. Of course he did, since I'd just said the Dumbest Thing Ever. I used to wish I were average, but I took it all back. I wanted to be sparkling and witty and magnetic.

"Kidding," I mumbled. "I know you meant carburetor. Internal combustion, et cetera."

He strolled around the car, eyeing it with the indifference one might give a bit of rubbish in a bin. "Shall I arrange a tow?"

Not unless there's a nearby bank I can rob. "No, thank you," I told him instead.

He came full circle to lean against the side. He crossed his arms, and I had to pull my gaze from the thickness of his biceps and from the quote tattooed there. "Is there someone I can ring for you?"

"No." I cleared my throat, inexplicably sad that our little encounter was quickly drawing to a close. *Paradis perdu.* I had

the feeling he'd forever be *my* lost paradise. "I'll make it on my own."

"Oh, dear." He shook his head, and I thought my heart might pound out of my chest. A man of such gigantic hotness saying "*Oh, dear*" was just too unbearably sexy. "A fine woman like you, all alone . . ."

Did he just call me a *woman*? I bit my lip, trying not to blush like a child. I tried to act flip, but my laugh in response sounded more like a weak puff of air.

What could he mean, *like you*? If I had a type, I'd be qualified as *Surly Valedictorian*. Definitely never have I ever been placed in a category even close to *Fine Woman*.

His eyes roved up and down my body, and I gave a quick tug on my shirt, even though I knew all my bits—modest though they were—languished safely in their appropriate places.

"A nasty predator could come and snatch you up." He gave me a wicked smile, his accent making what was probably just a playful comment sound dangerous. And then he *winked*.

Jeez, I thought my heart would explode on the spot. The last time a guy *winked* at me was years ago, and that'd been a creepy mall Santa.

"I'll be fine," I managed. "I'll just go back into the registrar's office and . . ." *And what?*

He eyed me speculatively. "Aren't you a bit young for university? What of your parents?"

Okay, that stung. So much for me looking all fine and womanly. I fought the urge to tug on the brim of my hat.

Really, did he have to ask about my parents? I normally liked to give a conversation ten minutes before hashing out the Painful Life Story. He's lucky something—I swear—softened around his eyes, because that's the only reason I answered. "Early graduation. I moved out."

"You can't be much older than sixteen," he mused. "You must be very bright."

I bristled. People see a petite blonde and assume you're some impressionable schoolgirl. "Eighteen on my next birthday."

He gave me a wicked smile. The guy was *toying* with me. So which was it: *a bit young* or *fine woman*? I wished I were gutsy enough to ask.

"But you're not going home?" He pinned me with a steady stare, and suddenly the prospect of discussing Ye Olde Home Life wasn't such a bummer.

"To Christmas?" Taking his raised brows for confusion, I added, "Yeah, some loser named a town Christmas, if you can believe it. And no, I don't think I'll be going home. It's just Coors—that's my dad—and the Yatch." I could tell he wasn't following, so I spelled it out. "You know, as in *bee-yatch*."

No smile, no response. Then he said, "Is the insipid slang intended to make you sound tough?"

ISLE OF NIGHT by Veronica Wolff -- excerpt

Floored, I gaped at him. I was pretty damned tough already, thanks for asking. Or at least that's what I wanted to say to him. But his voice had been low and quiet, as though he'd identified some truth about me.

"Never mind that. Come, Annelise." He stepped toward me, reaching out his hand. "I'll drive you."

It took a moment for my brain to register the words, as my hormones sent a million other thoughts (*He's even taller up close! We'll sit all cooped up together in that fancy car! We'll talk about Proust and share chocolate madeleines!*) running roughshod over logic and reason.

Finally, a single nugget of good sense hit me: *When did I tell him my name?*

I eyed him. He didn't seem like a serial killer. But, then again, what did serial killers seem like? Would a cold-blooded killer have been so obviously hanging out at the registrar's for all to see?

Why *not* hitch a ride somewhere? What could happen? The car windows were clear glass, and I imagined the doors were fully operational. Plus, the trunk was way too tiny to hide a body.

More important, where else was I supposed to go?

"I don't even know your name," I said, wanting to trust him.

His arm was outstretched, and it was gallant, not so much *Let's shake* as it was an exhilarating *Take my hand*. He locked his eyes with mine, and I felt as if I might spin into their green depths. Goose bumps shimmered across my flesh.

I couldn't help it. I let my hand slide into his, and he gave it a gentle squeeze. His grip was strong and smooth and warm. "Ronan," he said simply.

At his touch, all my concerns dropped away. My skin warmed, the surface of it buzzing, as if electricity were arcing between us.

He led me to the passenger's door. As my hand slid from his, my mind seemed to clear. I watched as he walked around to tuck my duffel in the trunk.

I knew a flicker of doubt, then recalled the feel of his fingers grazing across mine. I decided he seemed nice enough, just a kindly stranger. What would be the harm in catching a ride to some spring break town?

I made my decision. Opened the door. *Here goes nothing*. I folded myself into the tiny cockpit, smoothing my hands over the buttery black leather and pristine cherrywood dash.

Ronan got in, and the scent of male wrapped around me like a musky and intoxicating incense.

"Where are you from?" I asked a little dreamily, wondering what the hell *this* guy's major could be. "You can't really be a UF student. Can you?"

He pinned me with those intense eyes and inhaled deeply.

It felt like he was breathing me in. Did he feel my presence as intensely as I felt his? A shiver rippled across my skin.

“Oh, God,” I heard myself murmur.

He gave a husky laugh, and a sensation so overpowering thrummed through me, I was grateful to be sitting down. “*God*, is it? Do you believe in God, Annelise?”

“*Somebody* had enough irony to pack a hundred eighty-five IQ points into a blond head.”

Startlingly, Ronan laughed outright. Deep and loud, like he was at the pub and his team had just scored on the telly.

Honestly, it rocked my world. Usually I felt like I was cracking jokes in a language nobody else understood. Or sometimes *I* was the punch line—and believe me, it was a *really* awkward one. He got the joke, though, and the camaraderie of his laughter silenced me.

He held my gaze, finally asking, “Where to?”

“I don’t know.” Where was I supposed to go? I had to find a place to crash ASAP, and then there was my car to deal with, too. I could call a tow truck in Gainesville once I scraped together enough money, so I needed to find a job, like, yesterday. Preferably someplace where employees got free food, which meant back to waitressing for me. I knew the average Florida beach town had a crappy chain restaurant on every corner—maybe that was the answer.

I was riding the buzz of his laughter, elated by the sensation that somebody *got* me. I let the feeling shine through in the nonchalant tone of my response. “How about the coast?”

“The coast,” he repeated simply, and the power of it was heady. I was sitting in a car that cost more than anything *I’d* ever seen, with a guy drop-dead gorgeous enough to be a movie star, who’d not even blinked when the lady mentioned that perhaps she might have a yen for the coast.

Ronan turned onto the interstate, headed south. It was your standard-issue hideous stretch of highway. If you’ve ever wondered why Florida produced so many serial killers, take a drive along one of the state roads that cut through its very middle. You could practically see the menace wafting off the tarmac like those heat waves you got on long and desolate road trips.

Finally, he broached our destination. “What awaits you on the coast?”

Probably a homeless shelter, followed by a frantic search for a waitressing gig. But I chose not to say those bits. Let him think me a casual, come-what-may sort of girl.

Instead, I told him, “It’s what *doesn’t* await me.” Namely, a drunk dad, an evil stepmother, and another semester of being a social outcast at my high school.

My shoulders slumped the way they did every time I thought of Christmas, and deliberately I pulled them back, lifting my chin for good measure. “You try living in the boonies outside

Orlando. It sucks. It's hot. The rest of the state has all kinds of water and waves, and what do we get?"

He merely raised a brow.

"Gators, that's what."

"A hunter like any other." He shrugged, not seeming very impressed. He slipped the car into fifth, and it hummed like a tenor warming up at the Met. "This is what has you so outraged?"

I considered the nature of my outrage, and defaulted to my dear, sweet hometown.

"Come on. The place is called *Christmas*." If I'd had sleeves, I'd have rolled them up—I could do my Florida rant in my sleep. "Check out some Christmas fun facts. We're known for two things. We get lots of mail for Santa—I mean, duh. And we've got the largest alligator in the world. Name's Swampy, he's two hundred feet long, and there's a gift shop in his belly where you can buy crap like alligator meat. I tell you," I said, in my best fly-girl voice, "Santa ain't been home to Christmas since God knows when."

He chuckled, and the sound made my belly vibrate in a crazy way. "Indeed?"

Who said *indeed* anymore? "Yeah, indeed."

"Annelise?"

"People call me Drew."

"So I gathered." He cut me a look over the tops of his designer shades. "Annelise?"

The way his accent rolled out my given name brought the phrase *death knell* to mind. My chest was practically sore from all the heart thumping going on. "Yes?"

"You don't need to adopt that . . . attitude. It's unimaginative, and it's below you. You're capable of more."

His candor threw me. "Not easily impressed, I take it?"

"You impress me. Just not the act."

The act. He was right, actually. Call it my act; call it my armor. I called it coping. The only trouble was, I didn't know anymore if I could let my real self shine through. What would I even sound like? Who would I be?

I watched as he downshifted. The car whined in low gear. He quickly raked his dark hair from his brow and then popped the car back into third. His arm flexed with the movement, and each glimpse of his tattoo transfixed me.

I hadn't known guys like this even existed.

"Wait." I noticed he'd turned off onto a weird one-lane road. Alarm instantly cleared the dreamy thoughts from my head. Just my luck—the guy really was a serial killer. "Where are you taking me?"

"I'm thinking perhaps you'd rather travel to the coast by plane."